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NEDL TRANSFER
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HER PRAIRIE KNIGHT

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"CHIP OF THE FLYING U"

KD8250

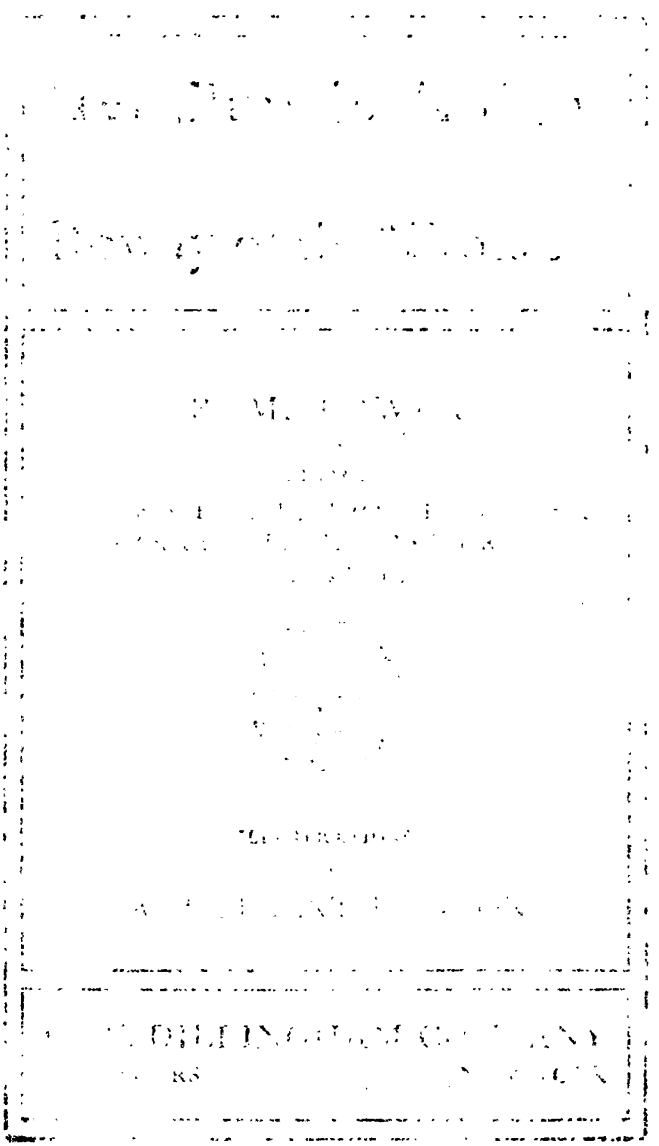
C. H. Wolcott.

5 Howard St

Westfield

Mass.

She was watching the restless moving mass of red backs and glistening horns . . . . *Frontispiece.* Page 54



Her Prairie Knight

AND

Rowdy of the "Cross L"

BY

B. M. BOWER
(B. M. SINCLAIR)
AUTHOR OF
"Chip, of the Flying 'U,'" "The Lonesome Trail," "The Lure of Dim Trails," "The Range Dwellers," etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
W. HERBERT DUNTON

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Her Prairie Knight—Rowdy of the "Cross L" Issued July, 1907

HER PRAIRIE KNIGHT

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HER PRAIRIE KNIGHT.

CHAPTER I.

Stranded on the Prairie.

"By George, look behind us! I fancy we are going to have a storm." Four heads turned as if governed by one brain; four pairs of eyes, of varied color and character, swept the wind-blown wilderness of tender green, and gazed questioningly at the high-piled thunderheads above. A small boy, with an abundance of yellow curls and white collar, almost precipitated himself into the prim lap of a lady on the rear seat.

"Auntie, will God have fireworks? Say, auntie, will He? Can I say prayers widout kneelin' down? Uncle Redmon' crowds so. I want to pray for fireworks, auntie. Can I?"

"Do sit down, Dorman. You'll fall under the wheel, and then auntie would not have any dear

little boy. Dorman, do you hear me? Redmond, do take that child down! How I wish Parks were here. I shall have nervous prostration within a fortnight."

Sir Redmond Hayes plucked at the white collar, and the small boy retired between two masculine forms of no mean proportions. His voice, however, rose higher.

"You'll get all the fireworks you want, young man, without all that hullabaloo," remarked the driver, whom Dorman had been told, at the depot twenty miles back, he must call his Uncle Richard.

"I love storms," came cheerfully from the rear seat—but the voice was not the prim voice of "auntie." "Do you have thunder and lightning out here, Dick?"

"We do," assented Dick. "We don't ship it from the East in refrigerator cars, either. It grows wild."

The cheerful voice was heard to giggle.

"Richard," came in tired, reproachful accents from a third voice behind him, "you were reared in the East. I trust you have not formed the pernicious habit of speaking slightingly of your birthplace."

That, Dick knew, was his mother. She had not changed appreciably since she had nagged him through his teens. Not having seen her since, he was certainly in a position to judge.

"Trix asked about the lightning," he said placatingly, just as he was accustomed to do, during the nagging period. "I was telling her."

"Beatrice has a naturally inquiring mind," said the tired voice, laying reproving stress upon the name.

"Are you afraid of lightning, Sir Redmond?" asked the cheerful girl-voice.

Sir Redmond twisted his neck to smile back at her. No, so long as it doesn't actually chuck me over."

After that there was silence, so far as human voices went, for a time.

"How much farther is it, Dick?" came presently from the girl.

"Not more than ten—well, maybe twelve—miles. You'll think it's twenty, though, if the rain strikes 'Dobe Flat before we do. That's just what it's going to do, or I'm badly mistaken. Hawk! Get along, there!"

"We haven't an umbrella with us," complained

the tired one. "Beatrice, where did you put my raglan?"

"In the big wagon, mama, along with the trunks and guns and saddles, and Martha and Katherine and James."

"Dear me! I certainly told you, Beatrice——"

"But, mama, you gave it to me the last thing, after the maids were in the wagon, and said you wouldn't wear it. There isn't room here for another thing. I feel like a slice of pressed chicken."

"Auntie, I want some p'essed chicken. I'm hungry, auntie! I want some chicken and a cookie—and I want some ice-cream."

"You won't get any," said the young woman, with the tone of finality. "You can't eat me, Dorman, and I'm the only thing that looks good enough to eat."

"Beatrice!" This, of course, from her mother, whose life seemed principally made up of a succession of mental shocks, brought on by her youngest, dearest, and most irrepressible.

"I have Dick's word for it, mama; he said so, at the depot."

"I want some chicken, auntie."

"There is no chicken, dear," said the prim one. "You must be a patient little man."

"I won't. I'm hungry. Mens aren't patient when dey're hungry." A small, red face rose, like a tiny harvest moon, between the broad, masculine backs on the front seat.

"Dorman, sit down! Redmond!"

A large, gloved hand appeared against the small moon and it set ignominiously and prematurely, in the place where it had risen. Sir Redmond further extinguished it with the lay robe, for the storm, whooping malicious joy, was upon them.

First a blinding glare and a deafening crash. Then rain—sheets of it, that drenched where it struck. The women huddled together under the doubtful protection of the light robe and shivered. After that, wind that threatened to overturn the light spring wagon; then hail that bounced and hopped like tiny, white rubber balls upon the ground.

The storm passed as suddenly as it came, but the effect remained. The road was sodden with the water which had fallen, and as they went down the hill to 'Dobe Flat the horses strained at the collar

and plodded like a plow team. The wheels collected masses of adobe, which stuck like glue and packed the spaces between the spokes. Twice Dick got out and poked the heavy mess from the wheels with Sir Redmond's stick—which was not good for the stick, but which eased the drag upon the horses wonderfully—until the wheels accumulated another load.

"Sorry to dirty your cane," Dick apologized, after the second halt. "You can rinse it off, though, in the creek a few miles ahead."

"Don't mention it!" said Sir Redmond, somewhat dubiously. It was his favorite stick, and he had taken excellent care of it. It was finely polished, and it had his name and regiment engraved upon the silver knob—and a date which the Boers will not soon forget, nor the English, for that matter.

"We'll soon be over the worst," Dick told them, after a time. "When we climb that hill we'll have a hard, gravelly trail straight to the ranch. I'm sorry it had to storm; I wanted you to enjoy this trip."

"I am enjoying it," Beatrice assured him. "It's something new, at any rate, and anything is better than the deadly monotony of Newport."

"Beatrice!" cried her mother. "I'm ashamed of you!"

"You needn't be, mama. Why won't you just be sorry for yourself, and let it end there? I know you hated to come, poor dear; but you wouldn't think of letting me come alone, though I'm sure I shouldn't have minded. This is going to be a delicious summer—I feel it in my bones."

"Be-atrice!"

"Why, mama? Aren't young ladies supposed to have bones?"

"Young ladies are not supposed to make use of unrefined expressions. Your poor sister——"

"There, mama. Dear Dolly didn't live upon stilts, I'm sure. Even when she married——"

"Be-atrice!"

"Dear me, mama! I hope you are not growing peevish. Peevish elderly people——"

"Auntie! I want to go home!" the small boy wailed.

"You cannot go home now, dear," sighed his guardian angel. "Look at the pretty——" She hesitated, groping vaguely for some object to which she might conscientiously apply the adjective.

"Mud," suggested Beatrice promptly. "Look at

the wheels, Dorman; they're playing patty-cake. See, now they say, 'Roll 'em, and roll 'em,' and now, 'Toss in the oven to bake!' And now——"

"Auntie, I want to get out an' play patty-cake, like de wheels. I want to awf'lly!"

"Beatrice, why did you put that into his head?" her mother demanded, fretfully.

"Never mind, honey," called Beatrice cheeringly. "You and I will make hundreds of mud pies when we get to Uncle Dick's ranch. Just think, hon, oodles of beautiful, yellow mud just beside the door!"

"Look here, Trix! Seems to me you're promising a whole lot you can't make good. I don't live in a 'dobe patch."

"Hush, Dick; don't spoil everything. You don't know Dorman.'

"Beatrice! What must Miss Hayes and Sir Redmond think of you? I'm sure Dorman is a sweet child, the image of poor, dear Dorothea, at his age."

"We all think Dorman bears a strong resemblance to his father," said his Aunt Mary.

Beatrice, scenting trouble, hurried to change the subject. "What's this, Dick—the Missouri River?"

"Hardly. This is the water that didn't fall in

the buggy. It isn't deep; it makes bad going worse, that's all."

Thinking to expedite matters, he struck Hawk sharply across the flank. It was a foolish thing to do, and Dick knew it when he did it; ten seconds later he knew it better.

Hawk reared, tired as he was, and lunged viciously.

The double-trees snapped and splintered; there was a brief interval of plunging, a shower of muddy water in that vicinity, and then two draggled, disgusted brown horses splashed indignantly to shore and took to the hills with straps flying.

"By George!" ejaculated Sir Redmond, gazing helplessly after them. "But this is a beastly bit of luck, don't you know!"

"Oh, you Hawk——" Dick, in consideration of his companions, finished the remark in the recesses of his troubled soul, where the ladies could not overhear.

"What comes next, Dick?" The voice of Beatrice was frankly curious.

"Next, I'll have to wade out and take after those——" This sentence, also, was rounded out mentally.

"In the meantime, what shall we do?"

"You'll stay where you are—and thank the good Lord you were not upset. I'm sorry"—turning so that he could look deprecatingly at Miss Hayes—"your welcome to the West has been so—er—strenuous. I'll try and make it up to you, once you get to the ranch. I hope you won't let this give you a dislike of the country."

"Oh, no," said the spinster politely. "I'm sure it is a—a very nice country, Mr. Lansell."

"Well, there's nothing to be done sitting here." Dick climbed down over the dashboard, into the mud and water.

Sir Redmond was not the man to shirk duty because it happened to be disagreeable, as the regiment whose name was engraved upon his cane could testify. He glanced regretfully at his immaculate leggings and followed.

"I fancy you ladies won't need any bodyguard," he said. Looking back, he caught the light of approval shining in the eyes of Beatrice, and after that he did not mind the mud, but waded to shore and joined in the chase quite contentedly. The light of approval, shining in the eyes of Beatrice, meant much to Sir Redmond.

CHAPTER II.

A Handsome Cowboy to the Rescue.

Beatrice took immediate possession of the front seat, that she might comfort her heartbroken young nephew.

"Never mind, honey. They'll bring the horses back in a minute, and we'll make them run every step. And when you get to Uncle Dick's ranch you'll see the nicest things—bossy calves, and chickens, and, maybe, some little pigs with curly tails."

All this, though alluring, failed of its purpose; the small boy continued to weep, and his weeping was ear-splitting.

"Be still, Dorman, or you'll certainly scare all the coyotes to death."

"Where are dey?"

"Oh, all around. You keep watch, hon, and maybe you'll see one put the tip of his nose over a hill."

"What hill?" Dorman skipped a sob, and scoured his eyes industriously with both fists.

"M-m—that hill. That little one over there. Watch close, or you'll miss him."

The dove of peace hovered over them, and seemed actually about to alight. Beatrice leaned back with a relieved breath.

"It is good of you, my dear, to take so much trouble," sighed his Aunt Mary. "How I am to manage without Parks I'm sure I cannot tell."

"You are tired, and you miss your tea," soothed Beatrice, optimistic as to tone. "When we all have a good rest we will be all right. Dorman will find plenty to amuse him. We are none of us exactly comfortable now."

"Comfortable!" sniffed her mother. "I am half-dead. Richard wrote such glowing letters home that I was misled. If I had dreamed of the true conditions, Miss Hayes, I should never have sanctioned this wild idea of Beatrice's to come out and spend the summer with Richard."

"It's coming, Be'trice! There it is! Will it bite, auntie? Say, will it bite?"

Beatrice looked. A horseman came over the hill and was galloping down the long slope toward them. His elbows were lifted contrary to the mandates of the riding-school, his long legs were incased in

something brown and fringed down the sides. His gray hat was tilted rakishly up at the back and down in front, and a handkerchief was knotted loosely around his throat. Even at that distance he struck her as different from any one she had ever seen.

"It's a highwayman!" whispered Mrs. Lansell. "Hide your purse, my dear!"

"I—I—where?" Miss Hayes was all a-flutter with fear.

"Drop it down beside the wheel, into the water. Quick! I shall drop my watch."

"He—he is coming on this side! He can see!" Her whisper was full of entreaty and despair.

"Give them here. He can't see on both sides of the buggy at once." Mrs. Lansell, being an American—a Yankee at that—was a woman of resource.

"Beatrice, hand me your watch—quick!"

Beatrice paid no attention, and there was no time to insist upon obedience. The horseman had slowed at the water's edge, and was regarding them with some curiosity. Possibly he was not accustomed to such a sight as the one that met his eyes. He came splashing toward them, however, as though he intended to investigate the cause of their presence, alone upon the prairie, in a vehicle which had no

horses attached in the place obviously intended for such attachment. When he was close upon them he stopped and lifted the rakishly tilted gray hat.

"You seem to be in trouble. Is there anything I can do for you?" His manner was grave and respectful, but his eyes, Beatrice observed, were having a quiet laugh of their own.

"You can't get auntie's watch, nor gran'mama's. Gran'mama frowed 'em all down in the mud. She frowed her money down in the mud, too," announced Dorman, with much complacency. "Be'trice says you is a coyote. Is you?"

There was a stunned interval, during which nothing was heard but the wind whispering things to the grass. The man's eyes stopped laughing; his jaw set squarely; also, his brows drew perceptibly closer together. It was Mrs. Lansell's opinion that he looked murderous.

Then Beatrice put her head down upon the little, blue velvet cap of Dorman and laughed. There was a rollicking note in her laughter that was irresistible, and the eyes of the man relented and joined in her mirth. His lips forgot they were angry and insulted, and uncovered some very nice teeth.

"We aren't really crazy," Beatrice told him, sitting up straight and drying her eyes daintily with her handkerchief. "We were on our way to Mr. Lansell's ranch, and the horses broke something and ran away, and Dick—Mr. Lansell—has gone to catch them. We're waiting until he does."

"I see." From the look in his eyes one might guess that what he saw pleased him. "Which direction did they take?"

Beatrice waved a gloved hand vaguely to the left, and, without another word, the fellow touched his hat, turned and waded to shore and galloped over the ridge she indicated; and the cluckety-cluck of his horse's hoofs came sharply across to them until he dipped out of sight.

"You see, he wasn't a robber," Beatrice remarked, staring after him speculatively. "How well he rides! One can see at a glance that he almost lives in the saddle. I wonder who he is."

"For all you know, Beatrice, he may be going now to murder Richard and Sir Redmond in cold blood. He looks perfectly hardened."

"Oh, do you think it possible?" cried Miss Hayes, much alarmed.

"No!" cried Beatrice hotly. "One who did not

know your horror of novels, mama, might suspect you of feeding your imagination upon 'penny dreadfuls.' I'm sure he is only a cowboy, and won't harm anybody."

"Cowboys are as bad as highwaymen," contended her mother, "or worse. I have read how they shoot men for a pastime, and without even the excuse of robbery."

"Is it possible?" quavered Miss Hayes faintly.

"No, it isn't!" Beatrice assured her indignantly.

"He has the look of a criminal," declared Mrs. Lansell, in the positive tone of one who speaks from intimate knowledge of the subject under discussion. "I only hope he isn't going to murder——"

"They're coming back, mama," interrupted Beatrice, who had been watching closely the hilltop. "No, it's that man, and he is driving the horses."

"He's chasing them," corrected her mother testily. "A horse thief, no doubt. He's going to catch them with his snare——"

"Lasso, mama."

"Well, lasso. Where can Richard be? To think the fellow should be so bold! But out here, with miles upon miles of open, and no police protection,

anything is possible. We might all be murdered, and no one be the wiser for days—perhaps weeks. There, he has caught them." She leaned back and clasped her hands, ready to meet with fortitude whatever fate might have in store.

"He's bringing them out to us, mama. Can't you see the man is only trying to help us?"

Mrs. Lansell, beginning herself to suspect him of honest intentions, sniffed dissentingly and let it go at that. The fellow was certainly leading the horses toward them, and Sir Redmond and Dick, appearing over the hill just then, proved beyond doubt that neither had been murdered in cold blood, or in any other unpleasant manner.

"We're all right now, mother," Dick called, the minute he was near enough.

His mother remarked skeptically that she hoped possibly she had been in too great haste to conceal her valuables—that Miss Hayes might not feel grateful for her presence of mind, and was probably wondering if mud baths were not injurious to fine, jeweled time-pieces. Mrs. Lansell was uncomfortable, mentally and physically, and her manner was frankly chilly when her son presented the stranger as his good friend and neighbor, Keith

Cameron. She was still privately convinced that he looked a criminal—though, if pressed, she must surely have admitted that he was an uncommonly good-looking young outlaw. It would seem almost as if she regarded his being a decent, law-abiding citizen as pure effrontery.

Miss Hayes greeted him with a smile of apprehension which plainly amused him. Beatrice was frankly impersonal in her attitude; he represented a new species of the genus man, and she, too, evidently regarded him in the light of a strange animal, viewed unexpectedly at close range.

While he was helping Dick mend the double-tree with a piece of rope, she studied him curiously. He was tall—taller even than Sir Redmond, and more slender. Sir Redmond had the straight, sturdy look of the soldier who had borne the brunt of hard marches and desperate fighting; Mr. Cameron the lithe, unconscious grace and alertness of the man whose work demands quick movement and quicker eye and brain. His face was tanned to a clear bronze which showed the blood darkly beneath; Sir Redmond's year of peace had gone far toward lightening his complexion. Beatrice glanced briefly at him and admired his healthy color, and

was glad he did not have the look of an Indian. At the same time, she caught herself wishing that Sir Redmond's eyes were hazel, fringed with very long, dark lashes and topped with very straight, dark brows—eyes which seemed always to have some secret cause for mirth, and to laugh quite independent of the rest of the face. Still, Sir Redmond had very nice eyes—blue, and kind, and steadfast, and altogether dependable—and his lashes were quite nice enough for any one. In just four seconds Beatrice decided that, after all, she did not like hazel eyes that twinkle continually; they make one feel that one is being laughed at, which is not comfortable. In six seconds she was quite sure that this Mr. Cameron thought himself handsome, and Beatrice detested a man who was proud of his face or his figure; such a man always tempted her to "make faces," as she used to do over the back fence when she was little.

She mentally accused him of trying to show off his skill with his rope when he leaned and fastened it to the rig, rode out ahead and helped drag the vehicle to shore; and it was with some resentment that she observed the ease with which he did it, and how horse and rope seemed to know instinctively

their master's will, and to obey of their own accord.

In all that he had done—and it really seemed as if he did everything that needed to be done, while Dick pottered around in the way—he had not found it necessary to descend into the mud and water, to the ruin of his picturesque, fringed chaps and high-heeled boots. He had worked at ease, carelessly leaning from his leathern throne upon the big, roan horse he addressed occasionally as Redcloud. Beatrice wondered where he got the outlandish name. But, with all his imperfections, she was glad she had met him. He really was handsome, whether he knew it or not; and if he had a good opinion of himself, and overrated his actions—all the more fun for herself! Beatrice, I regret to say, was not above amusing herself with handsome young men who overrate their own charms; in fact, she had the reputation among her women acquaintances of being a most outrageous flirt.

In the very middle of these trouble-breeding meditations, Mr. Cameron looked up unexpectedly and met keenly her eyes; and for some reason—let us hope because of a guilty conscience—Beatrice grew hot and confused; an unusual experience,

surely, for a girl who had been out three seasons, and has met calmly the eyes of many young men. Until now it had been the young men who grew hot and confused; it had never been herself.

Beatrice turned her shoulder toward him, and looked at Sir Redmond, who was surreptitiously fishing for certain articles beside the rear wheel, at the whispered behest of Mrs. Lansell, and was certainly a sight to behold. He was mud to his knees and to his elbows, and he had managed to plaster his hat against the wheel and to dirty his face. Altogether, he looked an abnormally large child who has been having a beautiful day of it in somebody's duck-pond; but Beatrice was nearer, at that moment, to loving him than she had been at any time during her six weeks' acquaintance with him—and that is saying much, for she had liked him from the start.

Mr. Cameron followed her glance, and his eyes did not have the laugh all to themselves; his voice joined them, and Beatrice turned upon him and frowned. It was not kind of him to laugh at a man who is proving his heart to be much larger than his vanity; Beatrice was aware of Sir Redmond's immaculateness of attire on most occasions.

"Well," said Dick, gathering up the reins, "you've helped us out of a bad scrape, Keith. Come over and take dinner with us to-morrow night. I expect we'll be kept riding the rim-rocks, over at the Pool, this summer. Unless this sister of mine has changed a lot, she won't rest till she's been over every foot of country for forty miles around. It will just about keep our strings rode down to a whisper keeping her in sight."

"Dear me, Richard!" said his mother. "What jargon is this you speak?"

"That's good old Montana English, mother. You'll learn it yourself before you leave here. I've clean forgot how they used the English language at Yale, haven't you, Keith?"

"Just about," Keith agreed. "I'm afraid we'll shock the ladies terribly, Dick. We ought to get out on a pinnacle with a good grammar and practise."

"Well, maybe. We'll look for you to-morrow, sure. I want you to help map out a circle or two for Trix. About next week she'll want to get out and scour the range."

"Dear me, Richard! Beatrice is not a charwoman!" This, you will understand, was from

his mother; perhaps you will also understand that she spoke with the rising inflection which conveys a reproof.

When Keith Cameron left them he was laughing quietly to himself, and Beatrice's chin was set rather more than usual.

CHAPTER III.

A Tilt With Sir Redmond.

Beatrice, standing on the top of a steep, grassy slope, was engaged in the conventional pastime of enjoying the view. It was a fine view, but it was not half as good to look upon as was Beatrice herself, in her fresh white waist and brown skirt, with her brown hair fluffing softly in the breeze which would grow to a respectable wind later in the day, and with her cheeks pink from climbing.

She was up where she could see the river, a broad band of blue in the surrounding green, winding away for miles through the hills. The far bank stood a straight two hundred feet of gay-colored rock, chiseled, by time and stress of changeful weather, into fanciful turrets and towers. Above and beyond, where the green began, hundreds of moving dots told where the cattle were feeding quietly. Far away to the south heaps of hazy blue and purple slept in the sunshine; Dick had told her those were the Highwoods. And away to the

west a jagged line of blue-white glimmered and stood upon tip-toes to touch the swimming clouds —touched them and pushed above proudly; those were the Rockies. The Bear Paws stood behind her; nearer they were—so near they lost the glamor of mysterious blue shadows, and became merely a sprawling group of huge, pine-covered hills, with ranches dotted here and there in sheltered places, with squares of fresh, dark green that spoke of growing crops.

Ten days, and the metropolitan East had faded and become as hazy and vague as the Highwoods. Ten days, and the witchery of the West leaped in her blood and held her fast in its thralldom.

A sound of scrambling behind her was immediately followed by a smothered epithet. Beatrice turned in time to see Sir Redmond pick himself up.

"These grass slopes are confounded slippery, don't you know," he explained apologetically. "How did you manage that climb?"

"I didn't." Beatrice smiled. "I came around the end, where the ascent is gradual; there's a good path."

"Oh!" Sir Redmond sat down upon a rock and puffed. "I saw you up here—and a fellow doesn't

think about taking a roundabout course to reach his heart's——"

"Isn't it lovely?" Beatrice made haste to inquire.

"Lovely isn't half expressive enough," he told her. "You look——"

"The river is so very blue and dignified. I've been wondering if it has forgotten how it must have danced through those hills, away off there. When it gets down to the cities—this blue water—it will be muddy and nasty looking. The 'muddy Missouri' certainly doesn't apply here. And that farther shore is simply magnificent. I wish I might stay here forever."

"The Lord forbid!" cried he, with considerable fervor. "There's a dear nook in old England where I hope——"

"You did get that mud off your leggings, I see," Beatrice remarked inconsequently. "James must have worked half the time we've been here. They certainly were in a mess the last time I saw them."

"Bother the leggings! But I take it that's a good sign, Miss Lansell—your taking notice of such things."

Beatrice returned to the landscape. "I wonder

who originated that phrase, 'The cattle grazing on a thousand hills'? He must have stood just here when he said it."

"Wasn't it one of your American poets? Longfellow, or—er——"

Beatrice simply looked at him a minute and said "Pshaw!"

"Well," he retorted, "you don't know yourself who it was."

"And to think," Beatrice went on, ignoring the subject, "some of those grazing cows and bossy calves are mine—my very own. I never cared before, or thought much about it, till I came out and saw where they live, and Dick pointed to a cow and the sweetest little red and white calf, and said: 'That's your cow and calf, Trix.' They were dreadfully afraid of me, though—I'm afraid they didn't recognize me as their mistress. I wanted to get down and pet the calf—it had the dearest little snub nose—but they bolted, and wouldn't let me near them."

"I fancy they were not accustomed to meeting angels unawares."

"Sir Redmond, I wish you wouldn't. You are so much nicer when you're not trying to be nice."

"I'll act a perfect brute," he offered eagerly, "if that will make you love me."

"It's hardly worth trying. I think you would make a very poor sort of villain, Sir Redmond. You wouldn't even be picturesque."

Sir Redmond looked rather floored. He was a good fighter, was Sir Redmond, but he was clumsy at repartee—or, perhaps, he was too much in earnest to fence gracefully. Just now he looked particularly foolish.

"Don't you think my brand is pretty? You know what it is, don't you?"

"I'm afraid not," he owned. "I fancy I need a good bit of coaching in the matter of brands."

"Yes," agreed Beatrice, "I fancy you do. My brand is a Triangle Bar—like this." With a sharp-pointed bit of rock she drew a more or less exact diagram in the yellow soil. "There are ever so many different brands belonging to the Northern Pool; Dick pointed them out to me, but I can't remember them. But whenever you see a Triangle Bar you'll be looking at my individual property. I think it was nice of Dick to give me a brand all my own. Mr. Cameron has a pretty brand, too—a Maltese Cross. The Maltese Cross was owned

at one time by President Roosevelt. Mr. Cameron bought it when he left college and went into the cattle business. He 'plays a lone hand,' as he calls it; but his cattle range with the Northern Pool, and he and Dick work together a great deal. I think he has lovely eyes, don't you?" The eyes of Beatrice were intent upon the Bear Paws when she said it—which brought her shoulder toward Sir Redmond and hid her face from him.

"I can't say I ever observed Mr. Cameron's eyes," said Sir Redmond stiffly.

Beatrice turned back to him, and smiled demurely. When Beatrice smiled that very demure smile, of which she was capable, the weather-wise generally edged toward their cyclone-cellars. Sir Redmond was not weather-wise—he was too much in love with her—and he did not possess a cyclone-cellar; he therefore suffered much at the hands of Beatrice.

"But surely you must have noticed that deep, deep dimple in his chin?" she questioned innocently. Keith Cameron, I may say, did not have a dimple in his chin at all; there was, however, a deep crease in it.

"I did not." Sir Redmond rubbed his own chin

which was so far from dimpling that is was rounded like half an apricot.

"Dear me! And you sat opposite to him at dinner yesterday, too! I suppose, then, you did not observe that his teeth are the whitest, evenest——"

"They make them cheaply over here, I'm told," he retorted, setting his heel emphatically down and annihilating a red and black caterpillar.

"Now, why did you do that? I must say you English are rather brutal?"

"I can't abide worms."

"Well, neither can I. And I think it would be foolish to quarrel about a man's good looks," Beatrice said, with surprising sweetness.

Sir Redmond hunched his shoulders and retreated to the comfort of his pipe. "A bally lot of good looks!" he sneered. "A woman is never convinced, though."

"I am." Beatrice sat down upon a rock and rested her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands—and an adorable picture she made, I assure you. "I'm thoroughly convinced of several things. One is Mr. Cameron's good looks; another is that you're cross."

Oh, come, now!" protested Sir Redmond feebly, and sucked furiously at his pipe.

"Yes," reiterated Beatrice, examining his perturbed face judicially; "you are downright ugly."

The face of Sir Redmond grew redder and more perturbed; just as Beatrice meant that it should; she seemed to derive a keen pleasure from goading this big, good-looking Englishman to the verge of apoplexy.

"I'm sure I never meant to be rude; but a fellow can't fall down and worship every young farmer, don't you know—not even to please you!"

Beatrice smiled and threw a pebble down the slope, watching it bound and skip to the bottom, where it rolled away and hid in the grass.

"I love this wide country," she observed, abandoning her torture with a suddenness that was a characteristic of her nature. When Beatrice had made a man look and act the fool she was ready to stop; one cannot say that of every woman. "One can draw long, deep breaths without robbing one's neighbor of oxygen. Everything is so big, and broad, and generous, out here. One can ride for miles and miles through the grandest, wildest places,

and—there aren't any cigar and baking-powder and liver-pill signs plastered over the rocks, thank goodness! If man has traveled that way before, you do not have the evidence of his passing staring you in the face. You can make believe it is all your own—by right of discovery. I'm afraid your England would seem rather little and crowded after a month or two of this." She swept her hand toward the river, and the grass-land beyond, and the mountains rimming the world.

"You should see the moors!" cried Sir Redmond, brightening under this peaceful mood of hers. "I fancy you would not find trouble in drawing long breaths there. Moor Cottage, where your sister and Miltmar lived, is surrounded by wide stretches of open—not like this, to be sure, but not half-bad in its way, either."

"Dolly grew to love that place, though she did write homesick letters at first. I was going over, after my coming out—and then came that awful accident, when she and Wiltmar were both drowned—and, of course, there was nothing to go for. I should have hated the place then, I think. But I should like——" Her voice trailed off dreamily, her eyes on the hazy Highwoods.

Sir Redmond watched her, his eyes a-shine; Beatrice in this mood was something to worship. He was almost afraid to speak, for fear she would snuff out the tiny flame of hope which her half-finished sentence had kindled. He leaned forward, his face eager.

"Beatrice, only say you will go—with me, dear!"

Beatrice started; for the moment she had forgotten him. Her eyes kept to the hills. "Go—to England? One trip at a time, Sir Redmond. I have been here only ten days, and we came for three months. Three months of freedom in this big, glorious place——"

"And then?" His voice was husky.

"And then—freckle lotions by the quart, I expect."

Sir Redmond got upon his feet, and he was rather white around the mouth.

"We Englishmen are a stubborn lot, Miss Beatrice. We won't stop fighting until we win."

"We Yankees," retorted she airily, "value our freedom above everything else. We won't surrender it without fighting for it first."

He caught eagerly at the lack of finality in her

tones. "I don't want to take your freedom, Beatrice. I only want the right to love you."

"Oh, as for that, I suppose you may love me as much as you please—only so you don't torment me to death talking about it."

Beatrice, not looking particularly tormented, waved answer to Dick, who was shouting something up at her, and went blithely down the hill, with Sir Redmond following gloomily, several paces behind.

CHAPTER IV.

Beatrice Learns a New Language.

"D'you want to see the boys work a bunch of cattle, Trix?" Dick said to her, when she came down to where he was leaning against a high board fence, waiting for her.

" 'Deed I do, Dicky—only I've no idea what you mean."

"The boys are going to cut out some cattle we've contracted to the government—for the Indians, you know. They're holding the bunch over in Dry Coulee; it's only three or four miles. I've got to go over and see the foreman, and I thought maybe you'd like to go along."

"There's nothing I can think of that I would like better. Won't it be fine, Sir Redmond?"

Sir Redmond did not say whether he thought it would be fine or not. He still had the white streak around his mouth, and he went through the gate and on to the house without a word—which was undoubtedly a rude thing to do. Sir Redmond was

not often rude. Dick watched him speculatively until he was beyond hearing them. Then, "What have you done to milord, Trix?" he wanted to know.

"Nothing," said Beatrice.

"Well," Dick said, with decision, "he looks to me like a man that has been turned down—hard. I can tell by the back of his neck."

This struck Beatrice, and she began to study the retreating neck of her suitor. "I can't see any difference," she announced, after a brief scrutiny. "It's rather sunburned and thick."

"I'll gamble his mind is a jumble of good English oaths—with maybe a sprinkling of Boer maledictions. What did you do?"

"Nothing—unless, perhaps, he objects to being disciplined a bit. But I also object to being badgered into matrimony—even with Sir Redmond."

"Even with Sir Redmond!" Dick whistled. "He's 'It,' then, is he?"

Beatrice had nothing to say. She walked beside Dick and looked at the ground before her.

"He doesn't seem a bad sort, sis, and the title will be nice to have in the family, if one cares for

such things. Mother does. She was disappointed, I take it, that Wiltmar was a younger son."

"Yes, she was. She used to think that Sir Redmond might get killed down there fighting the Boers, and then Wiltmar would be next in line. But he didn't, and it was Wiltmar who went first. And now—— Oh, it's humiliating, Dick! To be thrown at a man's head——" Tears were not far from her voice just then.

"I can see she wants you to nab the title. Well, sis, if you don't care for the man——"

"I never said I didn't care for him. But I just can't treat him decently, with mama dinning that title in my ears day and night. I wish there wasn't any title. Oh, it's abominable! Things have come to that point where an American girl with money is not supposed to care for an Englishman, no matter how nice he may be, if he has a title, or the prospect of one. Every one laughs and thinks it's the title she wants; they'd think it of me, and they'd say it. They would say Beatrice Lansell took her half-million and bought her a lord. And, after a while, perhaps Sir Redmond himself would half-believe it—and I couldn't bear that! And so I am

unbearably flippant and—I should think he'd hate me!"

"So you reversed the natural order of things, and refused him on account of the title?" Dick grinned surreptitiously.

"No, I didn't—not quite. I'm afraid he's dreadfully angry with me, though. I do wish he wasn't such a dear."

"You're the same old Trix. You've got to be held back from the trail you're supposed to take, or you won't travel it; you'll bolt the other way. If everybody got together and fought the notion, you would probably elope with milord inside a week. Mother means well, but she isn't on to her job a little bit. She ought to turn up her nose at the title."

"No fear of that! I've had it before my eyes till I hate the very thought of it. I—I wish I could hate him." Beatrice sighed deeply, and gave her hand to Dorman, who scurred up to her.

"I'll have the horses saddled right away," said Dick, and left them.

"Where you going, Be'trice? You going to ride a horse? I want to, awf'lly."

"I'm afraid you can't, honey; it's too far." Bea-

trice pushed a yellow curl away from his eyes with tender, womanly solicitude.

"Auntie won't care, 'cause I'm a brother. Auntie says she's goin' to send for Parks. I don't want Parks; 'sides, Parks is sick. I want a pony, and some ledder towsers wis fringes down 'em, and I want some little wheels on my feet. Mr. Cam'ron says I do need some little wheels, Be'trice."

"Did he, honey?"

"Yes, he did. I like Mr. Cam'ron, Be'trice; he let me ride his big, high pony. He's a berry good pony. He shaked hands wis me, Be'trice—he truly did."

"Did he, hon?" Beatrice, I am sorry to say, was not listening. She was wondering if Sir Redmond was really angry with her—too angry, for instance, to go over where the cattle were. He really ought to go, for he had come West in the interest of the Eastern stockholders in the Northern Pool, to investigate the actual details of the work. He surely would not miss this opportunity, Beatrice thought. And she hoped he was not angry.

"Yes, he truly did. Mr. Cam'ron interduced us, Be'trice. He said, 'Redcloud, dis is Master Dorman Hayes. Shake hands wis my frien' Dorman.'

And he put up his front hand, Be'trice, and nod his head, and I shaked his hand. I dess love that big, high pony, Be'trice. Can I buy him, Be'trice?"

"Maybe, kiddie."

"Can I buy him wis my six shiny pennies, Be'trice?"

"Maybe."

"Mr. Cam'ron lives right over that hill, Be'trice. He told me."

"Did he, hon?"

"Yes, he did. He 'vited me over, Be'trice. He's my friend, and I've got to buy my big, high pony. I'll let you shake hands wis him, Be'trice. I'll interduce him to you. And I'll let you ride on his back, Be'trice. Do you want to ride on his back?"

"Yes, honey."

Before Beatrice had time to commit herself they reached the house, and she let go Dorman's hand and hurried away to get into her riding-habit.

Dorman straightway went to find his six precious, shiny pennies, which Beatrice had painstakingly scoured with silver polish one day to please the little tyrant, and which increased their value many times—so many times, in fact, that he hid them every night in fear of burglars. Since he concealed

them each time in a different place, he was obliged to ransack his auntie's room every morning, to the great disturbance of Martha, the maid, who was an order-loving person.

Martha appeared just when he had triumphantly pounced upon his treasure rolled up in the strings of his aunt's chiffon opera-bonnet.

"Mercy upon us, Master Dorman! Whatever have you been doing?"

"I want my shiny pennies," said the young gentleman, composedly unwinding the roll, "to buy my big, high pony."

"Naughty, naughty boy, to muss my lady's fine bonnet like that! Look at things scattered over the floor, and my lady's fine handkerchiefs and gloves——" Martha stopped and meditated whether she might dare to shake him.

Dorman was laboriously counting his wealth, with much wrinkling of stubby nose and lifting of eyebrows. Having satisfied himself that they were really all there, he deigned to look around, with a fine masculine disdain of woman's finery.

"Oh, dose old things!" he sniffed. "I always fordet where I put my shiny pennies. Robbers might find them if I put them easy places. I'm

going to buy my big, high pony, and you can't shake his hand a bit, Martha."

"Well, I'm sure I don't want to!" Martha snapped back at him, and went down on all fours to gather up the things he had thrown down. "Whatever Parks was thinking of, to go and get fever, when she was the only one that could manage you, I don't know! And me picking up after you till I'm fair sick!"

"I'm glad you is sick," he retorted unfeelingly, and backed to the door. "I hopes you get sicker so your stummit makes you hurt. You can't ride on my big, high pony."

"Get along with you and your high pony!" cried the exasperated Martha, threatening with a hair-brush. Dorman, his six shiny pennies held fast in his damp little fist, fled down the stairs and out into the sunlight.

Dick and Beatrice were just ready to ride away from the porch. "I want to go wis you, Uncle Dick." Dorman had followed the lead of Beatrice, his divinity; he refused to say Richard, though grandmama did object to nicknames.

"Up you go, son. You'll be a cow-puncher yourself one of these days. I'll not let him fall, and

this horse is gentle." This last to satisfy Dorman's aunt, who wavered between anxiety and relief.

"You may ride to the gate, Dorman, and then you'll have to hop down and run back to your auntie and grandma. We're going too far for you to-day." Dick gave him the reins to hold, and let the horse walk to prolong the joy of it.

Dorman held to the horn with one hand, to the reins with the other, and let his small body swing forward and back with the motion of the horse, in exaggerated imitation of his friend, Mr. Cameron. At the gate he allowed himself to be set down without protest, smiled importantly through the bars, and thrust his arm through as far as it would reach, that he might wave good-by. And his divinity smiled back at him, and threw him a kiss, which pleased him mightily.

"You must have hurt milord's feelings pretty bad," Dick remarked. "I couldn't get him to come. He had to write a letter first, he said."

"I wish, Dick," Beatrice answered, a bit petulantly, "you would stop calling him milord."

"Milord's a good name," Dick contended. "It's bad enough to 'Sir' him to his face; I can't do it behind his back, Trix. We're not used to fancy

titles out here, and they don't fit the country, anyhow. I'm like you—I'd think a lot more of him if he was just a plain, everyday American, so I could get acquainted enough to call him 'Red Hayes.' I'd like him a whole lot better."

Beatrice was in no mood for an argument—on that subject, at least. She let Rex out and raced over the prairie at a gait which would have greatly shocked her mother, who could not understand why Beatrice was not content to drive sedately about in the carriage with the rest of them.

When they reached the round-up Keith Cameron left the bunch and rode out to meet them, and Dick promptly shuffled responsibility for his sister's entertainment to the square shoulders of his neighbor.

"Trix wants to wise up on the cattle business, Keith. I'll just turn her over to you for a while, and let you answer her questions; I can't, half the time. I want to look through the bunch a little."

Keith's face spoke gratitude, and spoke it plainly. The face of Beatrice was frankly inattentive. She was watching the restless, moving mass of red backs and glistening horns, with horsemen weaving in and out among them in what looked to her a perfectly aimless fashion—until one would wheel and dart

out into the open, always with a fleeing animal lumbering before. Other horsemen would meet him and take up the chase, and he would turn and ride leisurely back into the haze and confusion. It was like a kaleidoscope, for the scene shifted constantly and was never quite the same.

Keith, secure in her absorption, slid sidewise in the saddle and studied her face, knowing all the while that he was simply storing up trouble for himself. But it is not given a man to flee human nature, and the fellow who could sit calmly beside Beatrice and not stare at her if the opportunity offered must certainly have the blood of a fish in his veins. I will tell you why.

Beatrice was tall, and she was slim, and round, and tempting, with the most tantalizing curves ever built to torment a man. Her hair was soft and brown, and it waved up from the nape of her neck without those short, straggling locks and thin growth at the edge which mar so many feminine heads; and the sharp contrast of shimmery brown against ivory white was simply irresistible. Had her face been less full of charm, Keith might have been content to gaze and gaze at that lovely hair line. As it was, his eyes wandered to her brows.

also distinctly marked, as though outlined first with a pencil in the fingers of an artist who understood. And there were her lashes, dark and long, and curled up at the ends; and her cheek, with its changing, come-and-go coloring; her mouth, with its upper lip creased deeply in the middle—so deeply that a bit more would have been a defect—and with an odd little dimple at one corner; luckily, it was on the side toward him, so that he might look at it all he wanted to for once; for it was always there, only growing deeper and wickeder when she spoke or laughed. He could not see her eyes, for they were turned away, but he knew quite well the color; he had settled that point when he looked up from coiling his rope the day she came. They were big, baffling, blue-brown eyes, the like of which he had never seen before in his life—and he had thought he had seen every color and every shade under the sun. Thinking of them and their wonderful deeps and shadows, he got hungry for a sight of them. And suddenly she turned to ask a question, and found him staring at her, and surprised a look in his eyes he did not know was there.

For ten pulse-beats they stared, and the cheeks of Beatrice grew red as healthy young blood could

paint them; Keith's were the same, only that his blood showed darkly through the tan. What question had been on her tongue she forgot to ask. Indeed, for the time, I think she forgot the whole English language, and every other—but the strange, wordless language of Keith's clear eyes.

And then it was gone, and Keith was looking away, and chewing a corner of his lip till it hurt. His horse backed restlessly from the tight-gripped rein, and Keith was guilty of kicking him with his spur, which did not better matters. Redcloud snorted and shook his outraged head, and Keith came to himself and eased the rein, and spoke remorseful, soothing words that somehow clung long in the memory of Beatrice.

Just after that Dick galloped up, his elbows flapping like the wings of a frightened hen.

"Well, I suppose you could run a cow outfit all by yourself, with the knowledge you've got from Keith," he greeted, and two people became even more embarrassed than before. If Dick noticed anything, he must have been a wise young man, for he gave no sign.

But Beatrice had not queened it in her set, three seasons, for nothing, even if she was capable of

being confused by a sweet, new language in a man's eyes. She answered Dick quietly.

"I've been so busy watching it all that I haven't had time to ask many questions, as Mr. Cameron can testify. It's like a game, and it's very fascinating—and dusty. I wonder if I might ride in among them, Dick?"

"Better not, sis. It isn't as much fun as it looks, and you can see more out here. There comes milord; he must have changed his mind about the letter."

Beatrice did not look around. To see her, you would swear she had set herself the task of making an accurate count of noses in that seething mass of raw beef below her. After a minute she ventured to glance furtively at Keith, and, fining his eyes turned her way, blushed again and called herself an idiot. After that, she straightened in the saddle, and became the self-poised Miss Lansell, of New York.

Keith rode away to the far side of the herd, out of temptation; queer a man never runs from a woman until it is too late to be a particle of use. Keith simply changed his point of view, and watched his Heart's Desire from afar.

CHAPTER V.

The Search for Dorman.

"Oh, I say," began Sir Redmond, an hour after, when he happened to stand close to Beatrice for a few minutes, "where is Dorman? I fancied you brought him along."

"We didn't," Beatrice told him. "He only rode as far as the gate, where Dick left him, and started him back to the house."

"Mary told me he came along. She and your mother were congratulating each other upon a quiet half-day, with you and Dorman off the place together. I'll wager their felicitations fell rather flat."

Beatrice laughed. "Very likely. I know they were mourning because their lace-making had been neglected lately. What with that trip to Lost Cañon to-morrow, and to the mountains Friday, I'm afraid the lace will continue to suffer. What do you think of a round-up, Sir Redmond?"

"It's deuced nasty," said he. "Such a lot of

dust and noise. I fancy the workmen don't find it pleasant."

"Yes, they do; they like it," she declared. "Dick says a cowboy is never satisfied off the range. And you mustn't call them workmen, Sir Redmond. They'd resent it, if they knew. They're cowboys, and proud of it. They seem rather a pleasant lot of fellows, on the whole. I have been talking to one or two."

"Well, we're all through here," Dick announced, riding up. "I'm going to ride around by Keith's place, to see a horse I'm thinking of buying. Want to go along, Trix? Or are you tired?"

"I'm never tired," averred his sister, readjusting a hat-pin and gathering up her reins. "I always want to go everywhere that you'll take me, Dick. Consider that point settled for the summer. Are you coming, Sir Redmond?"

"I think not, thank you," he said, not quite risen above his rebuff of the morning. "I told Mary I would be back for lunch."

"I was wiser; I refused even to venture an opinion as to when I should be back. Well, 'so-long'!"

"You're learning the lingo pretty fast, Trix," Dick chuckled, when they were well away from Sir

Redmond. "Milord almost fell out of the saddle when you fired that at him. Where did you pick it up?"

"I've heard you say it a dozen times since I came. And I don't care if he is shocked—I wanted him to be. He needn't be such a perfect bear; and I know mama and Miss Hayes don't expect him to lunch, without us. He just did it to be spiteful."

"Jerusalem, Trix! A little while ago you said he was a dear! You shouldn't snub him, if you want him to be nice to you."

"I don't want him to be nice," flared Beatrice. "I don't care how he acts. Only, I must say, ill-humor doesn't become him. Not that it matters, however."

"Well, I guess we can get along without him, if he won't honor us with his company. Here comes Keith. Brace up, sis, and be pleasant."

Beatrice glanced casually at the galloping figure of Dick's neighbor, and frowned.

"You mustn't flirt with Keith," Dick admonished gravely. "He's a good fellow, and as square a man as I know; but you ought to know he's got the reputation of being a hard man to down. Lots of girls have tried to flirt and make a fool of him,

and wound up with their feelings hurt worse than his were."

"Is that a dare?" Beatrice threw up her chin with a motion Dick knew of old.

"Not on your life! You better leave him alone; one or the other of you would get the worst of it, and I'd hate to see either of you feeling bad. As I said before, he's a bad man to fool with."

"I don't consider him particularly dangerous—or interesting. He's not half as nice as Sir Redmond." Beatrice spoke as though she meant what she said, and Dick had no chance to argue the point, for Keith pulled up beside them at that moment.

Beatrice seemed inclined to silence, and paid more attention to the landscape than she did to the conversation, which was mostly about range conditions, and the scanty water supply, and the drought.

She was politely interested in Keith's ranch, and if she clung persistently to her society manner, why, her society manner was very pleasing, if somewhat unsatisfying to a fellow fairly drunk with her winsomeness. Keith showed her where she might look straight up the coulee to her brother's ranch, two miles away, and when she wished she

might see what they were doing up there, he went in and got his field-glass. She thanked him prettily, and impersonally, and focused the glass upon Dick's house—which gave Keith another chance to look at her without being caught in the act.

"How plain everything is! I can see mama, out on the porch, and Miss Hayes." She could also see Sir Redmond, who had just ridden up, and was talking to the ladies, but she did not think it necessary to mention him, for some reason; she kept her eyes to the glass, however, and appeared much absorbed. Dick rolled himself a cigarette and watched the two, and there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"I wonder—Dick, I do think—I'm afraid——" Beatrice hadn't her society manner now; she was her unaffected, girlish self; and she was growing excited.

"What's the matter?" Dick got up, and came and stood at her elbow.

"They're acting queerly. The maids are running about, and the cook is out, waving a large spoon, and mama has her arm around Miss Hayes, and Sir Redmond——"

"Let's see." Dick took the glass and raised it

to his eyes for a minute. "That's right," he said. "They're making medicine over something. See what you make of it, Keith."

Keith took the glass and looked through it. It was like a moving picture; one could see, but one wanted the interpretation of sound.

"We'd better ride over," he said quietly. "Don't worry, Miss Lansell; it probably isn't anything serious. We can take the short cut up the coulee, and find out." He put the glass into its leathern-case and started to the gate, where the horses were standing. He did not tell Beatrice that Miss Hayes had just been carried into the house in a faint, or that her mother was behaving in an undignified fashion strongly suggesting hysterics. But Dick knew, from the look on his face, that it was serious. He hurried before them with long strides, leaving Beatrice, for the second time that morning, to the care of his neighbor.

So it was Keith who held his hand down for the delicious pressure of her foot, and arranged her habit with painstaking care, considering the hurry they were in. Dick was in the saddle, and gone, before Keith had finished, and Keith was not a slow young man, as a rule.

They ran the two miles without a break, except twice, where there were gates to close. Dick, speeding a furlong before, had obligingly left them open; and a stockman is hard pressed indeed—or very drunk—when he fails to close his gates behind him. It is an unwritten law which becomes second nature.

Almost within sound of the place, Dick raced back and met them, and his face was white.

"It's Dorman!" he cried. "He's lost. They haven't seen him since we left. You know, Trix, he was standing at the gate——"

Beatrice went white as Dick; whiter, for she was untanned. An overwhelming sense of blame squeezed her heart tight. Keith, seeing her shoulders droop limply, reined close, to catch her in his arms if there was the slightest excuse. However, Beatrice was a healthy young woman, with splendid command of her nerves, and she had no intention of fainting. The sickening weakness passed in a moment.

"It's my fault," she said, speaking rapidly, her eyes seeking Dick's for comfort. "I said 'yes' to everything he asked me, because I was thinking of something else, and not paying attention. He was

going to buy your horse, Mr. Cameron, and now he's lost!"

This, though effective, was not particularly illuminating. Dick wanted details, and he got them—for Beatrice, having remorse to stir the dregs of memory, repeated nearly everything Dorman had said, even telling how the big, high pony put up his front hand, and he shaked it, and how Dorman truly needed some little wheels on his feet.

"Poor little devil," Keith muttered, with wet eyes.

"He—he said you lived over there," Beatrice finished, pointing, as Dorman had pointed—which was not toward the "Cross" ranch at all, but straight toward the river.

Keith wheeled Redcloud; there was no need to hear more. He took the hill at a pace which would have killed any horse but one bred to race over this rough country. Near the top, the forced breathing of another horse at his heels made him look behind. It was Beatrice following, her eyes like black stars. I do not know if Keith was astonished, but I do know that he was pleased.

"Where's Dick?" was all he said then.

"Dick's going to meet the men—the cowboys. Sir

Redmond went after them, when they found Dorman wasn't anywhere about the place."

Keith nodded understandingly, and slowed to let her come alongside.

"It's no use riding in bunches," he remarked, after a little. "On circle we always go in pairs. We'll find him, all right."

"We must," said Beatrice, simply, and shaded her eyes with her hand. For they had reached the top, and the prairie land lay all about them and below, lazily asleep in the sunshine.

Keith halted and reached for his glass. "It's lucky I brought it along," he said. "I wasn't thinking, at the time; I just slung it over my shoulder from habit."

"It's a good habit, I think," she answered, trying to smile; but her lips would only quiver, for the thought of her blame tortured her. "Can you see —anything?" she ventured wistfully.

Keith shook his head, and continued his search. "There are so many little washouts and coulees, down there, you know. That's the trouble with a glass—it looks only on a level. But we'll find him. Don't you worry about that. He couldn't go far."

"There isn't any real danger, is there?"

"Oh, no," Keith said. "Except——" He bit his lip angrily.

"Except what?" she demanded. "I'm not silly, Mr. Cameron—tell me."

Keith took the glass from his eyes, looked at her, and paid her the compliment of deciding to tell her, just as if she were a man.

"Nothing, only—he might run across a snake," he said. "Rattlers."

Beatrice drew her breath hard, but she was plucky. Keith thought he had never seen a pluckier girl, and the West can rightfully boast brave women.

She touched Rex with the whip. "Come," she commanded. "We must not stand here. It has been more than three hours——"

Keith put away the glass, and shot ahead to guide her.

"We must have missed him, somewhere." The eyes of Beatrice were heavy with the weariness born of anxiety and suspense. They stood at the very edge of the steep bluff which rimmed the river. "You don't think he could have——" Her eyes, shuddering down at the mocking, blue-gray ripples, finished the thought.

"He couldn't have got this far," said Keith. "His legs would give out, climbing up and down. We'll go back by a little different way, and look."

"There's something moving, off there." Beatrice pointed with her whip.

"That's a coyote," Keith told her; and then, seeing the look on her face: "They won't hurt any one. They're the rankest cowards on the range."

"But the snakes——"

"Oh, well, he might wander around for a week, and not run across one. We won't borrow trouble, anyway."

"No," she agreed languidly. The sun was hot, and she had not had anything to eat since early breakfast, and the river mocked her parched throat with its cool glimmer below. She looked down at it wistfully, and Keith, watchful of every passing change in her face, led her back to where a cold, little spring crept from beneath a rock; there, lifting her down, he taught her how to drink from her hand.

For himself, he threw himself down, pushed back his hat, and drank long and leisurely. A brown lock of hair, clinging softly together with moisture,

fell from his forehead and trailed in the clear water, and Beatrice felt oddly tempted to push it back where it belonged. Standing quietly watching his picturesque figure, she forgot, for the moment, that a little boy was lost among these peaceful, sun-bathed hills; she remembered only the man at her feet, drinking long, satisfying drafts, while the lock of hair floated in the spring.

"Now we'll go on." He stood up and pushed back the wet lock, which trickled a tiny stream down his cheek, and settled his gray hat in place.

Again that day he felt her foot in his palm, and the touch went over him in thrills. She was tired, he knew; her foot pressed heavier than it had before. He would have liked to take her in his arms and lift her bodily into the saddle, but he hardly dared think of such a blissful proceeding.

He set the pace slower, however, and avoided the steepest places, and he halted often on the higher ground, to scan sharply the coulees. And so they searched, these two, together, and grew to know each other better than in a month of casual meetings. And the grass nodded, and the winds laughed, and the stern hills looked on, quizzically silent. If they knew aught of a small boy with a wealth of

yellow curls and white collar, they gave no sign, and the two rode on, always seeking hopefully.

A snake buzzed sharply on a gravelly slope, and Keith, sending Beatrice back a safe distance, took down his rope and gave battle, beating the sinister, gray-spotted coil with the loop until it straightened and was still. He dismounted then, and pinched off the rattles—nine, there were, and a "button"—and gave them to Beatrice, who handled them gingerly, and begged Keith to carry them for her. He slipped them into his pocket, and they went on, saying little.

Back near the ranch they met Dick and Sir Redmond. They exchanged sharp looks, and Dick shook his head.

"We haven't found him—yet. The boys are riding circle around the ranch; they're bound to find him, some of them, if we don't."

"You had better go home," Sir Redmond told her, with a note of authority in his voice which set Keith's teeth on edge. "You look done to death; this is men's work."

Beatrice bit her lip, and barely glanced at him. "I'll go—when Dorman is found. What shall we do now, Dick?"

"Go down to the house and get some hot coffee, you two. We all snatched a bite to eat, and you need it. After that, you can look along the south side of the coulee, if you like."

Beatrice obediently turned Rex toward home, and Keith followed. The ranch seemed very still and lonesome. Some chickens were rolling in the dust by the gate, and scattered, cackling indignantly, when they rode up. Off to the left a colt whinnied wistfully in a corral. Beatrice, riding listlessly to the house, stopped her horse with a jerk.

"I heard—where is he?"

Keith stopped Redcloud, and listened. Came a thumping noise, and a wail, not loud, but unmistakable.

"Aunt-ie!"

Beatrice was on the ground as soon as Keith, and together they ran to the place—the bunk-house. The thumping continued vigorously; evidently a small boy was kicking, with all his might, upon a closed door; it was not a new sound to the ears of Beatrice, since the arrival in America of her young nephew. Keith flung the door wide open, upsetting the small boy, who howled.

Beatrice swooped down upon him and gathered

him so close she came near choking him. "You darling. Oh, Dorman!"

Dorman squirmed away from her. "I los' one shiny penny, Be'trice—and I couldn't open de door. Help me find my shiny penny."

Keith picked him up and set him upon one square shoulder. "We'll take you up to your auntie, first thing, young man."

"I want my one shiny penny. I want it!" Dorman showed symptoms of howling again.

"We'll come back and find it. Your auntie wants you now, and grandmama."

Beatrice, following after, was treated to a rather unusual spectacle; that of a tall, sun-browned fellow, with fringed chaps and brightly gleaming spurs, racing down the path; upon his shoulder, the wriggling form of an extremely disreputable small boy, with cobwebs in his curls, and his once white collar a dirty rag streaming out behind.

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Lansell's Lecture.

When the excitement had somewhat abated, and Miss Hayes was convinced that her idol was really there, safe, and with his usual healthy appetite, and when a messenger had been started out to recall the searchers, Dorman was placed upon a chair before a select and attentive audience, and invited to explain, which he did.

He had decided to borrow some little wheels from the bunk-house, so he could ride his big, high pony home. Mr. Cameron had little wheels on his feet, and so did Uncle Dick, and all the mens. (The audience gravely nodded assent.) Well, and the knob wasn't too high when he went in, but when he tried to open the door to go out, it was away up there! (Dorman measured with his arm.) And he fell down, and all his shiny pennies rolled and rolled. And he looked and looked where they rolled, and when he counted, one was gone. So he looked and looked for the one shiny penny till he

was tired to death. And so he climbed up high, into a funny bed on a shelf, and rested. And when he was rested he couldn't open the door, and he kicked and kicked, and then Be'trice came, and Mr. Cam'ron.

"And you said you'd help me find my one penny," he reminded Keith, blinking solemnly at him from the chair. "And I want to shake hands wis your big, high pony. I'm going to buy him wis my six pennies. Be'trice said I could."

Beatrice blushed, and Keith forgot where he was, for a minute, looking at her.

"Come and find my one shiny penny," Dorman commanded, climbing down. "And I want Be'trice to come. Be'trice can always find things."

"Beatrice cannot go," said his grandmother, who didn't much like the way Keith hovered near Beatrice, nor the look in his eyes. "Beatrice is tired."

"I want Be'trice!" Dorman set up his everyday howl, which started the dogs barking outside. His guardian angel attempted to soothe him, but he would have none of her; he only howled the louder, and kicked.

"There, there, honey, I'll go. Where's your hat?"

"Beatrice, you had better stay in the house; you have done quite enough for one day." The tone of the mother suggested things.

"It is imperative," said Beatrice, "for the peace and the well-being of this household, that Dorman find his penny without delay." When Beatrice adopted that lofty tone her mother was in the habit of saying nothing—and biding her time. Beatrice was so apt, if mere loftiness did not carry the day, to go a step further and flatly refuse to obey. Mrs. Lansell preferred to yield, rather than be openly defied.

So the three went off to find the shiny penny—and in exactly thirty-five minutes they found it. I will not say that they could not have found it sooner, but, at any rate, they didn't, and they reached the house about two minutes behind Dick and Sir Redmond, which did not improve Sir Redmond's temper to speak of.

After that, Keith did not need much urging from Dick to spend the rest of the afternoon at the "Pool" ranch. When he wanted to, Keith could be very nice indeed to people; he went a long way, that afternoon, toward making a friend of Miss Hayes; but Mrs. Lansell, who was one of those

women who adhere to the theory of First Impressions, in capitals, continued to regard him as an incipient outlaw, who would, in time and under favorable conditions, reveal his true character, and vindicate her keen insight into human nature. There was one thing which Mrs. Lansell never forgave Keith Cameron, and that was the ruin of her watch, which refused to run while she was in Montana.

That night, when Beatrice was just snuggling down into the delicious coolness of her pillow, she heard some one rap softly, but none the less imperatively, on her door. She opened one eye stealthily, to see her mother's pudgy form outlined in the feeble moonlight.

"Beatrice, are you asleep?"

Beatrice did not say yes, but she let her breath out carefully in a slumbrous sigh. It certainly sounded as if she were asleep.

"Be-atrice!" The tone, though guarded, was insistent.

The head of Beatrice moved slightly, and settled back into its little nest, for all the world like a dreaming, innocent baby.

If she had not been the mother of Beatrice, Mrs. Lansell would probably have gone back to her

room, and continued to bide her time; but the mother of Beatrice had learned a few things about the ways of a wilful girl. She went in, and closed the door carefully behind her. She did not wish to keep the whole house awake. Then she went straight to the bed, laid hand upon a white shoulder that gleamed in the moonlight, and gave a shake.

"Beatrice, I want you to answer me when I speak."

"M-m—did you—m-m—speak, mama?" Beatrice opened her eyes and closed them, opened them again for a minute longer, yawned daintily, and by these signs and tokens wandered back from dreamland obediently.

Her mother sat down upon the edge of the bed, and the bed creaked. Also, Beatrice groaned inwardly; the time of reckoning was verily drawing near. She promptly closed her eyes again, and gave a sleepy sigh.

"Beatrice, did you refuse Sir Redmond again?"

"M-m—were you speaking—mama?"

Mrs. Lansell, endeavoring to keep her temper, repeated the question.

Beatrice began to feel that she was an abused

girl. She lifted herself to her elbow, and thumped the pillow spitefully.

"Again? Dear me, mama! I've never refused him once!"

"You haven't accepted him once, either," her mother retorted; and Beatrice lay down again.

"I do wish, Beatrice, you would look at the matter in a sensible light. I'm sure I never would ask you to marry a man you could not care for. But Sir Redmond is young ,and good-looking, and has birth and breeding, and money—no one can accuse him of being a fortune-hunter, I'm sure. I was asking Richard to-day, and he says Sir Redmond holds a large interest in the Northern Pool, and other English investors pay him a salary, besides, to look after their interests. I wouldn't be surprised if the holdings of both of you would be sufficient to control the business."

Beatrice, not caring anything for business anyway, said nothing.

"Any one can see the man's crazy for you. His sister says he never cared for a woman before in his life."

"Of course," put in Beatrice sarcastically. "His

sister followed him down to South Africa, and all around, and is in a position to know."

"Any one can see he isn't a lady's man."

"No"—Beatrice smiled reminiscently; "he certainly isn't."

"And so he's in deadly earnest. And I'm positive he will make you a model husband."

"Only think of having to live, all one's life, with a model husband!" shuddered Beatrice hypocritically.

"Be-atrice! And then, it's something to marry a title."

"That's the worst of it," remarked Beatrice.

"Any other girl in America would jump at the chance. I do believe, Beatrice, you are hanging back just to be aggravating. And there's another thing, Beatrice. I don't approve of the way this Keith Cameron hangs around you."

"He doesn't!" denied Beatrice, in an altogether different tone. "Why, mama!"

"I don't approve of flirting, Beatrice, and you know it. The way you gadded around over the hills with him—a perfect stranger—was disgraceful; perfectly disgraceful. You don't know any-

thing about the fellow, whether he's a fit companion or not—a wild, uncouth cowboy——"

"He graduated from Yale, a year after Dick. And he was halfback two——"

"That doesn't signify," said her mother, "a particle. I know Miss Hayes was dreadfully shocked to see you come riding up with him, and Sir Redmond forced to go with Richard, or ride alone."

"Dick is good company," said Beatrice. "And it was his own fault. I asked him to go with us, when Dick and I left the cattle, and he wouldn't. Dick will tell you the same. And after that I did not see him until just before we—I came home. Really, mama, I can't have a leading-string on Sir Redmond. If he refuses to come with me, I can hardly insist."

"Well, you must have done something. You said something, or did something, to make him very angry. He has not been himself all day. What did you say?"

"Dear me, mama, I am not responsible for all Sir Redmond's ill-humor."

"I did not ask you that, Beatrice."

Beatrice thumped her pillow again. "I don't

remember anything very dreadful, mama. I—I think he has indigestion."

"Be-atrice! I do wish you would try to conquer that habit of flippancy. It is not ladylike. And I warn you, Sir Redmond is not the man to dangle after you forever. He will lose patience, and go back to England without you—and serve you right! I am only talking for your own good, Beatrice. I am not at all sure that you want him to leave you alone."

Beatrice was not at all sure, either. She lay still, and wished her mother would stop talking for her good. Talking for her good had meant, as far back as Beatrice could remember, saying disagreeable things in a disagreeable manner.

"And remember, Beatrice, I want this flirting stopped."

"Flirting, mama?" To hear the girl, you would think she had never heard the word before.

"That's what I said, Beatrice. I shall speak to Richard in the morning about this fellow Cameron. He must put a stop to his being here two-thirds of the time. It is unendurable."

"He and Dick are chums, mama, and have been for years. And to-morrow we are going to Lost

Cañon, you know, and Mr. Cameron is to go along. And there are several other trips, mama, to which he is already invited. Dick cannot recall those invitations."

"Well, it must end there. Richard must do something. I cannot see what he finds about the fellow to like—or you, either, Beatrice. Just because he rides like a—a wild Indian, and has a certain daredevil way——"

"I never said I liked him, mama," Beatrice protested, somewhat hastily. "I—of course, I try to treat him well——"

"I should say you did!" exploded her mother angrily. "You would be much better employed in trying to treat Sir Redmond half as well. It is positively disgraceful, the way you behave toward him—as fine a man as I ever met in my life. I warn you, Beatrice, you must have more regard for propriety, or I shall take you back to New York at once. I certainly shall."

With that threat, which she shrewdly guessed would go far toward bringing this wayward girl to time, Mrs. Lansell got up off the bed, which creaked its relief, and groped her way to her own room.

The pillow of Beatrice received considerable thumping during the next hour—a great deal more, in fact, than it needed. Two thoughts troubled her more than she liked. What if her mother was right, and Sir Redmond lost patience with her and went home? That possibility was unpleasant, to say the least. Again, would he give her up altogether if she showed Dick she was not afraid of Keith Cameron, for all his good looks, and at the same time taught that young man a much-needed lesson? The way he had stared at her was nothing less than a challenge—and Beatrice was sorely tempted.

CHAPTER VII.

Beatrice's Wild Ride.

"Well, are we all ready?" Dick gathered up his reins, and took critical inventory of the load. His mother peered under the front seat to be doubly sure that there were at least four umbrellas and her waterproof raglan in the rig; Mrs. Lansell did not propose to be caught unawares in a storm another time. Miss Hayes straightened Dorman's cap, and told him to sit down, dear, and then called upon Sir Redmond to enforce the command. Sir Redmond repeated her command, minus the dear, and then rode on ahead to overtake Beatrice and Keith, who had started. Dick climbed up over the front wheel, released the brake, chirped at the horses, and they were off for Lost Cañon.

Beatrice was behaving beautifully, and her mother only hoped to heaven it would last the day out; perhaps Sir Redmond would be able to extract some sort of a promise from her in that mood, Mrs. Lansell reflected, as she watched Bea-

trice chatting to her two cavaliers, with the most decorous impartiality. Sir Redmond seemed in high spirits, which argued well; Mrs. Lansell gave herself up to the pleasure of the drive with a heart free from anxiety. Not only was Beatrice at her best; Dorman's mood was nothing short af angelic, and as the weather was simply perfect, the day surely promised well.

For a mile Keith had showed signs of a mind not at ease, and at last he made bold to speak.

"I thought Rex was to be your saddle-horse?" he said abruptly to Beatrice.

"He was; but when Dick brought Goldie home, last night, I fell in love with him on sight, and just teased Dick till he told me I might have him to ride."

"I thought Dick had some sense," Keith said gloomily.

"He has. He knew there would be no peace till he surrendered."

"I didn't know you were going to ride him, when I sold him to Dick. He's not safe for a woman."

"Does he buck, Mr. Cameron? Dick said he was gentle." Beatrice had seen a horse buck, one

day, and had a wholesome fear of that form of equine amusement.

"Oh, no. I never knew him to."

"Then I don't mind anything else. I'm accustomed to horses," said Beatrice, and smiled welcome to Sir Redmond, who came up with them at that moment.

"You want to ride him with a light rein," Keith cautioned, clinging to the subject. "He's tender-bitted, and nervous. He won't stand for any jerking, you see."

"I never jerk, Mr. Cameron." Keith discovered that big, baffling, blue-brown eyes can, if they wish, rival liquid air for coldness. "I rode horses before I came to Montana."

Of course, when a man gets frozen with a girl's eyes, and scorched with a girl's sarcasm, the thing for him to do is to retreat until the atmosphere becomes normal. Keith fell behind just as soon as he could do so with some show of dignity, and for several miles tried to convince himself that he would rather talk to Dick and "the old maid" than not.

"Don't you know," Sir Redmond remarked sympathetically, "some of these Western fellows are inclined to be deuced officious and impertinent."

Sir Redmond got a taste of the freezing process that made him change the subject abruptly.

The way was rough and lonely; the trail wound over sharp-nosed hills and through deep, narrow coulees, with occasional, tantalizing glimpses of the river and the open land beyond, that kept Beatrice in a fever of enthusiasm. From riding blithely ahead, she took to lagging far behind with her kodak, getting snap-shots of the choicest bits of scenery.

"Another cartridge, please, Sir Redmond," she said, and wound industriously on the finished roll.

"It's a jolly good thing I brought my pockets full." Sir Redmond fished one out for her. "Was that a dozen?"

"No; that had only six films. I want a larger one this time. It is a perfect nuisance to stop and change. Be still, Goldie!"

"We're getting rather a long way behind—but I fancy the road is plain."

"We'll hurry and overtake them. I won't take any more pictures."

"Until you chance upon something you can't resist. I understand all that, you know." Sir Redmond, while he teased, was pondering whether this

was an auspicious time and place to ask Beatrice to marry him. He had tried so many times and places that seemed auspicious, that the man was growing fearful. It is not pleasant to have a girl smile indulgently upon you and deftly turn your avowals aside, so that they fall flat.

"I'm ready," she announced, blind to what his eyes were saying.

"Shall we trek?" Sir Redmond sighed a bit. He was not anxious to overtake the others.

"We will. Only, out here people never 'trek,' Sir Redmond. They 'hit the trail.'"

"So they do. And the way these cowboys do it, one would think they were couriers, by Jove! with the lives of a whole army at stake. So I fancy we had better hit the trail, eh?"

"You're learning," Beatrice assured him, as they started on. "A year out here, and you would be a real American, Sir Redmond."

Sir Redmond came near saying, "The Lord forbid!" but he thought better of it. Beatrice was intensely loyal to her countrymen, unfortunately, and would certainly resent such a remark; but, for all that, he thought it.

For a mile or two she held to her resolve, and

then, at the top of a long hill overlooking the cañon where they were to eat their lunch, out came her kodak again.

"This must be Lost Cañon, for Dick has stopped by those trees. I want to get just one view from here. Steady, Goldie! Dear me, this horse does detest standing still!"

"I fancy he is anxious to get down with the others. Let me hold him for you. Whoa, there!" He put a hand upon the bridle, a familiarity Goldie resented. He snorted and dodged backward, to the ruin of the picture Beatrice was endeavoring to get.

"Now you've frightened him. Whoa, pet! It's of no use to try; he won't stand."

"Let me have your camera. He's getting rather an ugly temper, I think." Sir Redmond put out his hand again, and again Goldie dodged backward.

"I can do better alone, Sir Redmond." The cheeks of Beatrice were red. She managed to hold the horse in until her kodak was put safely in its case, but her temper, as well as Goldie's, was roughened. She hated spoiling a film, which she was perfectly sure she had done.

Goldie felt the sting of her whip when she

brought him back into the road, and, from merely fretting, he took to plunging angrily. Then, when Beatrice pulled him up sharply, he thrust out his nose, grabbed the bit in his teeth, and bolted down the hill, past all control.

"Good God, hold him!" shouted Sir Redmond, putting his horse to a run.

The advice was good, and Beatrice heard it plainly enough, but she neither answered nor looked back. How, she thought, resentfully, was one to hold a yellow streak of rage, with legs like wire springs and a neck of iron? Besides, she was angrily alive to the fact that Keith Cameron, watching down below, was having his revenge. She wondered if he was enjoying it.

He was not. Goldie, when he ran, ran blindly in a straight line, and Keith knew it. He also knew that the Englishman couldn't keep within gunshot of Goldie, with the mount he had, and half a mile away—Keith shut his teeth hard together, and went out to meet her. Redcloud lay along the ground in great leaps, but Keith, bending low over his neck, urged him faster and faster, until the horse, his ears laid close against his neck, did the best there was in him. From the tail of his eye, Keith saw Sir

Redmond's horse go down upon his knees, and get up limping—and the sight filled him with ungenerous gladness; Sir Redmond was out of the race. It was Keith and Redcloud—they two; and Keith could smile over it.

He saw Beatrice's hat loosen and lift in front, flop uncertainly, and then go sailing away into the sage-brush, and he noted where it fell, that he might find it, later. Then he was close enough to see her face, and wondered that there was so little fear written there. Beatrice was plucky, and she rode well, her weight upon the bit; but her weight was nothing to the clinched teeth of the horse; and, though she had known it from the start, she was scarcely frightened. There was a good deal of the dare-devil in Beatrice; she trusted a great deal to blind luck.

Just there the land was level, and she hoped to check him on the slope of the hill before them. She did not know it was moated like a castle, with a washout ten feet deep and twice that in width, and that what looked to her quite easy was utterly impossible.

Keith gained, every leap. In a moment he was close behind.

"Take your foot out of the stirrup," he commanded, harshly, and though Beatrice wondered why, something in his voice made her obey.

Now Redcloud's nose was even with her elbow; the breath from his wide-flaring nostrils rose hotly in her face. Another bound, and he had forged ahead, neck and neck with Goldie, and it was Keith by her side, keen-eyed and calm.

"Let go all hold," he said. Reaching suddenly, he caught her around the waist and pulled her from the saddle, just as Redcloud, scenting danger, plowed his front feet deeply into the loose soil and stopped dead still.

It was neatly done, and quickly; so quickly that before Beatrice had more than gasped her surprise, Keith lowered her to the ground and slid out of the saddle. Beatrice looked at him, and wondered at his face, and at the way he was shaking. He leaned weakly against the horse and hid his face on his arm, and trembled at what had come so close to the girl—the girl, who stood there panting a little, with her wonderful, waving hair cloaking her almost to her knees, and her blue-brown eyes wide and bright, and full of a deep amazement. She forgot Goldie, and did not even look to see what had become of

him; she forgot nearly everything, just then, in wonder at this tall, clean-built young fellow, who never had seemed to care what happened, leaning there with his face hidden, his hat far back on his head and little drops standing thickly upon his forehead. She waited a moment, and when he did not move, her thoughts drifted to other things.

"I wonder," she said abstractedly, "if I broke my kodak."

Keith lifted his head and looked at her. "Your kodak—good Lord!" He looked hard into her eyes, and she returned the stare.

"Come here," he commanded, hoarsely, catching her arm. "Your kodak! Look down there!" He led her to the brink, which was close enough to set him shuddering anew. "Look! There's Goldie, damn him! It's a wonder he's on his feet; I thought he'd be dead—and serve him right. And you—you wonder if you broke your kodak!"

Beatrice drew back from him, and from the sight below, and if she were frightened, she tried not to let him see. "Should I have fainted?" She was proud of the steadiness of her voice. "Really, I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Cameron, for saving me from an ugly fall. You did it very neatly, I

imagine, and I am grateful. Still, I really hope I didn't break my kodak. Are you very disappointed because I can't faint away? There doesn't seem to be any brook close by, you see—and I haven't my —er—lover's arms to fall into. Those are the regulation stage settings, I believe, and——"

"Don't worry, Miss Lansell. I didn't expect you to faint, or to show any human feelings whatever. I do pity your horse, though."

"You didn't a minute ago," she reminded him. "You indulged in a bit of profanity, if I remember——"

"For which I beg Goldie's pardon," he retorted, his eyes unsmiling.

"And mine, I hope."

"Certainly."

"I think it's rather absurd to stand here sparring, Mr. Cameron. You'll begin to accuse me of ingratitude, and I'm as grateful as possible for what you did. Sir Redmond's horse was too slow to keep up, or he would have been at hand, no doubt."

"And could have supplied part of the stage setting. Too bad he was behind." Keith turned and readjusted the cinch on his saddle, though it was

not loose enough to matter, and before he had finished Sir Redmond rode up.

"Are you hurt, Beatrice?" His face was pale, and his eyes anxious.

"Not at all. Mr. Cameron kindly helped me from the saddle in time to prevent an accident. I wish you'd thank him, Sir Redmond. I haven't the words."

"You needn't trouble," said Keith hastily, getting into the saddle. "I'll go down after Goldie. You can easily find the camp, I guess, without a pilot." Then he galloped away and left them, and would not look back; if he had done so, he would have seen Beatrice's eyes following him remorsefully. Also, he would have seen Sir Redmond glare after him jealously; for Sir Redmond was not in a position to know that their tête-à-tête had not been a pleasant one, and no man likes to have another fellow save the life of a woman he loves, while he himself is limping painfully up from the rear.

However, the woman he loved was very gracious to him that day, and for many days, and Keith Cameron held himself aloof during the rest of the trip, which should have contented Sir Redmond.

CHAPTER VIII.

Dorman Plays Cupid.

Dorman toiled up the steps, his straw hat perilously near to slipping down his back, his face like a large, red beet, and his hands vainly trying to reach around a baking-powder can which the Chinaman cook had given him.

He marched straight to where Beatrice was lying in the hammock. If she had been older, or younger, or a plain young woman, one might say that Beatrice was sulking in the hammock, for she had not spoken anything but "yes" and "no" to her mother for an hour, and she had only spoken those two words occasionally, when duty demanded it. For one thing, Sir Redmond was absent, and had been for two weeks, and Beatrice was beginning to miss him dreadfully. To beguile the time, she had ridden, every day, long miles into the hills. Three times she had met Keith Cameron, also riding alone in the hills, and she had endeavored to amuse herself with him, after her own inimitable fashion,

and with more or less success. The trouble was, that sometimes Keith seemed to be amusing himself with her, which was not pleasing to a girl like Beatrice. At any rate, he proved himself quite able to play the game of Give and Take, so that the conscience of Beatrice was at ease; no one could call her pastime a slaughter of the innocents, surely, when the fellow stood his ground like that. It was more a fencing-bout, and Beatrice enjoyed it very much; she told herself that the reason she enjoyed talking with Keith was because he was not always getting hurt, like Sir Redmond—or, if he did, he kept his feelings to himself, and went boldly on with the game. Item: Beatrice had reversed her decision that Keith was vain, though she still felt tempted, at times, to resort to "making faces"—when she was worsted, that was.

To return to this particular day of sulking; Rex had cast a shoe, and lamed himself just enough to prevent her riding, and so Beatrice was having a dull day of it in the house. Besides, her mother had just finished talking to her for her good, which was enough to send an angel into the sulks—and Beatrice lacked a good deal of being an angel.

Dorman laid his baking-powder can confidingly

in his divinity's lap. "Be'-trice, I did get some grasshoppers; you said I couldn't. And you wouldn't go fishin', 'cause you didn't like to take Uncle Dick's make-m'lieve flies, so I got some really ones, Be'trice, that'll wiggle dere own self."

"Oh, dear me! It's too hot, Dorman."

" 'Tisn't, Be'trice. It's dest as cool—and by de brook it's awf-lly cold. Come, Be'trice!" He pulled at the smart little pink ruffles on her skirt.

"I'm too sleepy, hon."

"You can sleep by de brook, Be'trice. I'll let you," he promised generously, " 'cept when I need anudder grasshopper; nen I'll wake you up."

"Wait till to-morrow. I don't believe the fish are hungry to-day. Don't tear my skirt to pieces, Dorman!"

Dorman began to whine. He had never found his divinity in so unlovely a mood. "I want to go now! Dey are too hungry, Be'trice! Looey Sam is goin' to fry my fishes for dinner, to s'prise auntie. Come, Be'trice!"

"Why don't you go with the child, Beatrice? You grow more selfish every day." Mrs. Lansell could not endure selfishness—in others. "You know he will not give us any peace until you do."

Dorman instantly proceeded to make good his grandmother's prophecy, and wept so that one could hear him a mile.

"Oh, dear me! Be still, Dorman—your auntie has a headache. Well, get your rod, if you know where it is—which I doubt." Beatrice flounced out of the hammock and got her hat, one of those floppy white things, fluffed with thin, white stuff, till they look like nothing so much as a wisp of cloud, with ribbons to moor it to her head and keep it from sailing off to join its brothers in the sky.

Down by the creek, where the willows nodded to their own reflections in the still places, it was cool and sweet scented, and Beatrice forgot her grievances, and was not sorry she had come.

(It was at about this time that a tall young fellow, two miles down the coulee, put away his field-glass and went off to saddle his horse.)

"Don't run ahead so, Dorman," Beatrice cautioned. To her had been given the doubtful honor of carrying the baking-powder can of grasshoppers. Even divinities must make themselves useful to man.

"Why, Be'trice?" Dorman swished his rod in unpleasant proximity to his divinity's head.

"Because, honey"—Beatrice dodged—"you might step on a snake, a rattlesnake, that would bite you."

"How would it bite, Be'trice?"

"With its teeth, of course; long, wicked teeth, with poison on them."

"I saw one when I was ridin' on a horse wis Uncle Dick. It kept windin' up till it was round, and it growled wis its tail, Be'trice. And Uncle Dick chased it, and nen it unwinded itself and creeped under a big rock. It didn't bite once—and I didn't see any teeth to it."

"Carry your rod still, Dorman. Are you trying to knock my hat off my head? Rattlesnakes have teeth, hon, whether you saw them or not. I saw a great, long one that day we thought you were lost. Mr. Cameron killed it with his rope. I'm sure it had teeth."

"Did it growl, Be'trice? Tell me how it went."

"Like this, hon." Beatrice parted her lips ever so little, and a snake buzzed at Dorman's feet. He gave a yell of terror, and backed ingloriously.

"You see, honey, if that had been really a snake, it would have bitten you. Never mind, dear—it was only I."

Dorman was some time believing this astonish-

ing statement. "How did you growl by my feet, Be'trice? Show me again."

Beatrice, who had learned some things at school which were not included in the curriculum, repeated the performance, while Dorman watched her with eyes and mouth at their widest. Like some older members of his sex, he was discovering new witcheries about his divinity every day.

"Well, Be'trice!" He gave a long gasp of ecstasy. "I don't see how can you do it? Can't I do it, Be'trice?"

"I'm afraid not, honey—you'd have to learn. There was a queer French girl at school, who could do the strangest things, Dorman—like fairy tales, almost. And she taught me to throw my voice different places, and mimic sounds, when we should have been at our lessons. Listen, hon. This is how a little lamb cries, when he is lost. . . . And this is what a hungry kittie says, when she is away up in a tree, and is afraid to come down. . . .

Dorman danced all around his divinity, and forgot about the fish—until Beatrice found it in her heart to regret her rash revelation of hitherto undreamed-of powers of entertainment.

"Not another sound, Dorman," she declared at

She disposed herself comfortably in the thick grass, her back against a tree . . . . . Page 103

length, with the firmness of despair. "No, I will not be a lost lamb another once. No, nor a hungry kittie, either—nor a snake, or anything. If you are not going to fish, I shall go straight back to the house."

Dorman sighed heavily, and permitted his divinity to fasten a small grasshopper to his hook.

"We'll go a bit farther, dear, down under those great trees. And you must not speak a word, remember, or the fish will all run away."

When she had settled him in a likely place, and the rapt patience of the born angler had folded him close, she disposed herself comfortably in the thick grass, her back against a tree, and took up the shuttle of fancy to weave a wonderful day-dream, as beautiful, intangible as the lacy, summer clouds over her head.

A man rode quietly over the grass and stopped two rods away, that he might fill his hungry eyes with the delicious loveliness of his Heart's Desire.

"Got a bite yet?"

Dorman turned and wrinkled his nose, by way of welcome, and shook his head vaguely, as though he might tell of several unimportant nibbles, if it were worth the effort.

Beatrice sat a bit straighter, and dexterously whisked some pink ruffles down over two distracting ankles, and hoped Keith had not taken notice of them. He had, though; trust a man for that!

Keith dismounted, dropped the reins to the ground, and came and laid himself down in the grass beside his Heart's Desire, and Beatrice noticed how tall he was, and slim and strong.

"How did you know we were here?" she wanted to know, with lifted eyebrows.

Keith wondered if there was a welcome behind that sweet, indifferent face. He never could be sure of anything in Beatrice's face, because it never was alike twice, it seemed to him—and if it spoke welcome for a second, the next there was only raillery, or something equally unsatisfying.

"I saw you from the trail," he answered promptly, evidently not thinking it wise to mention the field-glass. And then: "Is Dick at home?" Not that he wanted Dick—but a fellow, even when he is in the last stages of love, feels need of an excuse sometimes.

"No—we women are alone to-day. There isn't a man on the place, except Looey Sam, and he doesn't count."

Dorman squirmed around till he could look at the two, and his eyebrows were tied in a knot. "I wish, Be'trice, you wouldn't talk, 'less you whisper. De fishes won't bite a bit."

"All right, honey—we won't."

Dorman turned back to his fishing with a long breath of relief. His divinity never broke a promise, if she could help it.

If Dorman Hayes had been Cupid himself, he could not have hit upon a more impish arrangement than that. To place a girl like Beatrice beside a fellow like Keith—a fellow who is tall, and browned, and extremely good-looking, and who has hazel eyes with a laugh in them always—a fellow, moreover, who is very much in love and very much in earnest about it—and condemn him to silence, or to whispers!

Keith took advantage of the edict, and moved closer, so that he could whisper in comfort—and be nearer his Heart's Desire. He lay with his head propped upon his hand, and his elbow digging into the sod and getting grass-stains on his shirt sleeve, for the day was too warm for a coat. Beatrice, looking down at him, observed that his forearm, between his glove and wrist-band, was as white and

smooth as her own. It is characteristic of a cowboy to have a face brown as an Indian, and hands girlishly white and soft.

"I haven't had a glimpse of you for a week—not since I met you down by the river. Where have you been?" he whispered.

"Here. Rex went lame, and Dick wouldn't let me ride any other horse, since that day Goldie bolted—and so the hills have called in vain. I've stayed at home and made quantities of Duchesse lace—I almost finished a love of a center piece—and mama thinks I have reformed. But Rex is better, and to-morrow I'm going somewhere."

"Better help me hunt some horses that have been running down Lost Cañon way. I'm going to look for them to-morrow," Keith suggested, as calmly as was compatible with his eagerness and his method of speech. I doubt if any man can whisper things to a girl he loves, and do it calmly. I know Keith's heart was pounding.

"I shall probably ride in the opposite direction," Beatrice told him wickedly. She wondered if he thought she would run at his beck.

"I never saw you in this dress before," Keith murmured, his eyes caressing.

"No? You may never again," she said. "I have so many things to wear out, you know."

"I like it," he declared, as emphatically as he could, and whisper. "It is just the color of your cheeks, after the wind has been kissing them a while."

"Fancy a cowboy saying pretty things like that!" Beatrice's cheeks did not wait for the wind to kiss them pink.

"Ya-as, only fawncy, ye knaw." His eyes were daringly mocking.

"For shame, Mr. Cameron! Sir Redmond would not mimic your speech."

"Good reason why; he couldn't, not if he tried a thousand years."

Beatrice knew this was the truth, so she fell back upon dignity.

"We will not discuss that subject, I think."

"I don't want to, anyway. I know another subject a million times more interesting than Sir Redmond."

"Indeed!" Beatrice's eyebrows were at their highest. "And what is it, then?"

"You!" Keith caught her hand; his eyes compelled her.

"I think," said Beatrice, drawing her hand away, "we will not discuss that subject, either."

"Why?" Keith's eyes continued to woo.

"Because."

It occurred to Beatrice that an unsophisticated girl might easily think Keith in earnest, with that look in his eyes.

Dorman, scowling at them over his shoulder, unconsciously did his divinity a service. Beatrice pursed her lips in a way that drove Keith nearly wild, and took up the weapon of silence.

"You said you women are alone—where is milord?" Keith began again, after two minutes of lying there watching her.

"Sir Redmond is in Helena, on business. He's been making arrangements to lease a lot of land."

"Ah-h!" Keith snapped a twig off a dead willow, near.

"We look for him home to-day, and Dick drove in to meet the train."

"So the Pool has gone to leasing land?" The laugh had gone out of Keith's eyes; they were clear and keen.

"Yes—the plan is to lease the Pine Ridge coun-

try, and fence it. I suppose you know where that is."

"I ought to," Keith said quietly. "It's funny Dick never mentioned it."

"It isn't Dick's idea," Beatrice told him. "It was Sir Redmond's. Dick is rather angry, I think, and came near quarreling with Sir Redmond about it. But English capital controls the Pool, you know, and Sir Redmond controls the English capital, so he can adopt whatever policy he chooses. The way he explained the thing to me, it seems a splendid plan—don't you think so?"

"Yes." Keith's tone was not quite what he meant it to be; he did not intend it to be ironical, as it was. "It's a snap for the Pool, all right. It gives them a cinch on the best of the range, and all the water. I didn't give milord credit for such business sagacity."

Beatrice leaned over that she might read his eyes, but Keith turned his face away. In the shock of what he had just learned, he was at the moment, not the lover; he was the small cattleman who is being forced out of the business by the octopus of combined capital. It was not less bitter that the woman he loved was one of the tentacles reaching

out to crush him. And they could do it; they—the whole affair resolved itself into a very simple scheme, to Keith. The gauntlet had been thrown down—because of this girl beside him. It was not so much business acumen as it was the antagonism of a rival that had prompted the move. Keith squared his shoulders, and mentally took up the gauntlet. He might lose in the range fight, but he would win the girl, if it were in the power of love to do it.

"Why that tone? I hope it isn't—will it inconvenience you?"

"Oh, no. No, not at all. No——" Keith seemed to forget that a superabundance of negatives breeds suspicion of sincerity.

"I'm afraid that means that it will. And I'm sure Sir Redmond never meant——"

"I believe that kid has got a bite at last," Keith interrupted, getting up. "Let me take hold, there, Dorman; you'll be in the creek yourself in a second." He landed a four-inch fish, carefully rebaited the hook, cast the line into a promising eddy, gave the rod over to Dorman, and went back to Beatrice, who had been watching him with troubled eyes.

"Mr. Cameron, if I had known——" Beatrice

was good-hearted, if she was fond of playing with a man's heart.

"I hope you're not letting that business worry you, Miss Lansell. You remind me of a painting I saw once in Boston. It was called June."

"But this is August, so I don't apply. Isn't there some way you——"

"Did you hear about that train-robbery up the line last week?" Keith settled himself luxuriously upon his back, with his hands clasped under his head, and his hat tipped down over his eyes—but not enough to prevent him from watching his Heart's Desire. And in his eyes laughter—and something sweeter—lurked. If Sir Redmond had wealth to fight with, Keith's weapon was far and away more dangerous, for it was the irresistible love of a masterful man—the love that sweeps obstacles away like straws.

"I am not interested in train-robberies," Beatrice told him, her eyes still clouded with trouble. "I want to talk about this lease."

"They got one fellow the next day, and another got rattled and gave himself up; but the leader of the gang, one of Montana's pet outlaws, is still ranging somewhere in the hills. You want to be

careful about riding off alone; you ought to let some one—me, for instance—go along to look after you."

"Pshaw!" said his Heart's Desire, smiling reluctantly. "I'm not afraid. Do you suppose, if Sir Redmond had known——"

"Those fellows made quite a haul—almost enough to lease the whole country, if they wanted to. Something over fifty thousand dollars—and a strong box full of sand, that the messenger was going to fool them with. He did, all right; but they weren't so slow. They hustled around and got the money, and he lost his sand into the bargain."

"Was that meant for a pun?" Beatrice blinked her big eyes at him. "If you're quite through with the train-robbers, perhaps you will tell me how——"

"I'm glad old Mother Nature didn't give every woman an odd dimple beside the mouth," Keith observed, reaching for her hat, and running a ribbon caressingly through his fingers.

"Why?" Beatrice smoothed the dimple complacently with her finger-tips.

"Why? Oh, it would get kind of monotonous, wouldn't it?"

"This from a man known chiefly for his pretty

speeches!" Beatrice's laugh had a faint tinge of chagrin.

"Wouldn't pretty speeches get monotonous, too?" Keith's eyes were laughing at her.

"Yours wouldn't," she retorted, spitefully, and immediately bit her lip and hoped he would not consider that a bid for more pretty speeches.

"Be'trice, dis hopper is awf-lly wilted!" came a sepulchral whisper from Dorman.

Keith sighed, and went and baited the hook again. When he returned to Beatrice, his mood had changed.

"I want you to promise——"

"I never make promises of any sort, Mr. Cameron." Beatrice had fallen back upon her airy tone, which was her strongest weapon of defense—unless one except her liquid-air smile.

"I wasn't thinking of asking much," Keith went on coolly. "I only wanted to ask you not to worry about that leasing business."

"Are you worrying about it, Mr. Cameron?"

"That isn't the point. No, I can't say I expect to lose sleep over it. I hope you will dismiss anything I may have said from your mind."

"But I don't understand. I feel that you blame Sir Redmond, when I'm sure he——"

"I did not say I blamed anybody. I think we'll not discuss it."

"Yes, I think we shall. You'll tell me all about it, if I want to know." Beatrice adopted her coaxing tone, which never had failed her.

"Oh, no!" Keith laughed a little. "A girl can't always have her own way just because she wants it, even if she——"

"I've got a fish, Mr. Cam'ron!" Dorman squealed, and Keith was obliged to devote another five minutes to diplomacy.

"I think you have fished long enough, honey," Beatrice told Dorman decidedly. "It's nearly dinner time, and Looey Sam won't have time to fry your fish if you don't hurry home. Shall I tell Dick you wished to see him, Mr. Cameron?"

"It's nothing important, so I won't trouble you," Keith replied, in a tone that matched hers for cool courtesy. "I'll see him to-morrow, probably." He helped Dorman reel in his line, cut a willow-wand and strung the three fish upon it by the gills, washed his hands leisurely in the creek, and dried them on his handkerchief, just as if nothing bothered him in

the slightest degree. Then he went over and smoothed Redcloud's mane and pulled a wisp of forelock from under the brow-band, and commanded him to shake hands, which the horse did promptly.

"I want to shake hands wis your pony, too," Dorman cried, and dropped pole and fish heedlessly into the grass.

"All right, kid."

Dorman went up gravely and clasped Redcloud's raised fetlock solemnly, while the tall cow-puncher smiled down at him.

"Kiss him, Redcloud," he said softly; and then, when the horse's nose was thrust in his face: "No, not me—kiss the kid." He lifted the child up in his arms, and when Redcloud touched his soft nose to Dorman's cheek and lifted his lip for a dainty, toothless nibble, Dorman was speechless with fright and rapture thrillingly combined.

"Now run home with your fish; it lacks only two hours and forty minutes to dinner time, and it will take at least twenty minutes for the fish to fry—so you see you'll have to hike."

Beatrice flushed and looked at him sharply, but Keith was getting into the saddle and did not ap-

pear to remember she was there. The fingers that were tying her hat-ribbons under her chin fumbled awkwardly and trembled. Beatrice would have given a good deal at that moment to know just what Keith Cameron was thinking; and she was in a blind rage with herself to think that it mattered to her what he thought.

When he lifted his hat she only nodded curtly. She mimicked every beast and bird she could think of on the way home, to wipe him and his horse from the memory of Dorman, whose capacity for telling things best left untold was simply marvelous.

It is saying much for Beatrice's powers of entertainment that Dorman quite forgot to say anything about Mr. Cameron and his pony, and chattered to his auntie and grandmama about kitties up in a tree, and lost lambs and sleepy birds, until he was tucked into bed that night. It was not until then that Beatrice felt justified in drawing a long breath. Not that she cared whether any one knew of her meeting Keith Cameron, only that her mother would instantly take alarm and preach to her about the wickedness of flirting; and Beatrice was not in the mood for sermons.

CHAPTER IX.

What It Meant to Keith.

"Dick, I wish you'd tell me about this leasing business. There are points which I don't understand." Beatrice leaned over and smoothed Rex's sleek shoulder with her hand.

"What do you want to understand it for? The thing is done now. We've got the fence-posts strung, and a crew hired to set them."

"You needn't snap your words like that, Dick. It doesn't matter—only I was wondering why Mr. Cameron acted so queer yesterday when I told him about it."

"You told Keith? What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything. He just looked things."

"Where did you see him?" Dick wanted to know.

"Well, dear me! I don't see that it matters where I saw him. You're gretting as inquisitive as mama. If you think it concerns you, why, I met him accidentally when I was fishing with Dorman. He was coming to see you, but you were gone, so he stopped

and talked for a few minutes. Was there anything so strange about that? And I told him you were leasing the Pine Ridge country, and he looked—well, peculiar. But he wouldn't say anything."

"Well, he had good reason for looking peculiar. But you needn't have told him I did it, Trix. Lay that at milord's door, where it belongs. I don't want Keith to blame me."

"But why should he blame anybody? It isn't his land, is it?"

"No, it isn't. But—you see, Trix, it's this way: A man goes somewhere and buys a ranch—or locates on a claim—and starts into the cattle business. He may not own more than a few hundred acres of land, but if he has much stock he needs miles of prairie country, with water, for them to range on. It's an absolute necessity, you see. He takes care to locate where there is plenty of public land that is free to anybody's cattle.

"Take the Pool outfit, for instance. We don't own land enough to feed one-third of our cattle. We depend on government land for range for them. The Cross outfit is the same, only Keith's is on a smaller scale. He's got to have range outside his own land, which is mostly hay land. This part of

the State is getting pretty well settled up with small ranchers, and then the sheep men keep crowding in wherever they can get a show—and sheep will starve cattle to death; they leave a range as bare as a prairie-dog town. So there's only one good bit of range left around here, and that's the Pine Ridge country, as it's called. That's our main dependence for winter range; and now when this drought has struck us, and everything is drying up, we've had to turn all our cattle down there on account of water.

"Ever since I took charge of the Pool, Keith and I threw in together and used the same range, worked our crews together, and fought the sheepmen together. There was a time when they tried to gobble the Pine Ridge range, but it didn't go. Keith and I made up our minds that we needed it worse than they did—and we got it. Our punchers had every sheep herder bluffed out till there wasn't a mutton-chewer could keep a bunch of sheep on that range over-night.

"Now, this lease law was made by stockmen, for stockmen. They can lease land from the government, fence it—and they've got a cinch on it as long as the lease lasts. A cow outfit can corral a

heap of range that way. There's the trick of leasing every other section or so, and then running a fence around the whole chunk; and that's what the Pool has done to the Pine Ridge. But you mustn't repeat that, Trix.

"Milord wasn't long getting on to the leasing graft; in fact, it turns out the company got wind of it over in England, and sent him over here to see what could be done in that line. He's done it, all right enough!

"And there's the Cross outfit, frozen out completely. The Lord only knows what Keith will do with his cattle now, for we'll have every drop of water under fence inside of a month. He's in a hole, for sure. I expect he feels pretty sore with me, too, but I couldn't help it. I explained how it was to milord, but—you can't persuade an Englishman, any more than you can a——"

"I think," put in Beatrice firmly, "Sir Redmond did quite right. It isn't his fault that Mr. Cameron owns more cattle than he can feed. If he was sent over here to lease the land, it was his duty to do so. Still, I really am sorry for Mr. Cameron."

"Keith won't sit down and take his medicine if he can help it," Dick said moodily. "He could sell

out, but I don't believe he will. He's more apt to fight."

"I can't see how fighting will help him," Beatrice returned spiritedly.

"Well, there's one thing," retorted Dick. "If milord wants that fence to stand he'd better stay and watch it. I'll bet money he won't more than strike Liverpool till about forty miles, more or less, of Pool fence will need repairs mighty bad—which it won't get, so far as I'm concerned."

"Do you mean that Keith Cameron would destroy our fencing?"

Dick grinned. "He'll be a fool if he don't, Trix. You can tell milord he'd better send for all his traps, and camp right here till that lease runs out. My punchers will have something to do beside ride fence."

"I shall certainly tell Sir Redmond," Beatrice threatened. "You and Mr. Cameron hate him just because he's English. You won't see what a splendid fellow he is. It's your duty to stand by him in this business, instead of taking sides with Keith Cameron. Why didn't he lease that land himself, if he wanted to?"

"Because he plays fair."

"Meaning, I suppose, that Sir Redmond doesn't. I didn't think you would be so unjust. Sir Redmond is a perfect gentleman."

"Well, you've got a chance to marry your 'perfect gentleman,'" Dick retorted, savagely. "It's a wonder you don't take him if you think so highly of him."

"I probably shall. At any rate, he isn't a male flirt."

"You don't seem to fancy a fellow that can give you as good as you send," Dick rejoined. "I thought you wouldn't find Keith such easy game, even if he does live on a cattle ranch. You can't rope him into making a fool of himself for your amusement, and I'm glad of it."

"Don't do your shouting too soon. If you could overhear some of the things he says you wouldn't be so sure——"

"I suppose you take them all for their face value," grinned Dick ironically.

"No, I don't! I'm not a simple country girl, let me remind you. Since you are so sure of him, I'll have the pleasure of saying, 'No, thank you, sir,' to your Keith Cameron—just to convince you I can."

"Oh, you will! Well, you just tell me when you

do, Trix, and I'll give you your pick of all the saddle horses on the ranch."

"I'll take Rex, and you may as well consider him mine. Oh, you men! A few smiles, judiciously dispensed, and——" Beatrice smiled most exasperatingly at her brother, and Dick went moody and was very poor company the rest of the way home.

CHAPTER X.

Pine Ridge Range Ablaze.

At dusk that night a glow was in the southern sky, and the wind carried the pungent odor of burning grass. Dick went out on the porch after dinner, and sniffed the air uneasily.

"I don't much like the look of it," he admitted to Sir Redmond. "It smells pretty strong, to be across the river. I sent a couple of the boys out to look a while ago. If it's this side of the river we'll have to get a move on."

"It will be the range land, I take it, if it's on this side," Sir Redmond remarked.

Just then a man thundered through the lane and up to the very steps of the porch, and when he stopped the horse he was riding leaned forward and his legs shook with exhaustion.

"The Pine Ridge Range is afire, Mr. Lansell," the man announced quietly.

Dick took a long pull at his cigar and threw it away. "Have the boys throw some barrels and

sacks into a wagon—and git!" He went inside and grabbed his hat, and when he turned Sir Redmond was at his elbow.

"I'm going, too, Dick," cried Beatrice, who always seemed to hear anything that promised excitement. "I never saw a prairie-fire in my life."

"It's ten miles off," said Dick shortly, taking the steps at a jump.

"I don't care if it's twenty—I'm going. Sir Redmond, wait for me!"

"Be-atrice!" cried her mother detainingly; but Beatrice was gone to get ready. A quick job she made of it; she threw a dark skirt over her thin, white one, slipped into the nearest jacket, snatched her riding-gauntlets off a chair where she had thrown them, and then couldn't find her hat. That, however, did not trouble her. Down in the hall she appropriated one of Dick's, off the hall tree, and announced herself ready. Sir Redmond laughed, caught her hand, and they raced together down to the stables before her mother had fully grasped the situation.

"Isn't Rex saddled, Dick?"

Dick, his foot in the stirrup, stopped long enough to glance over his shoulder at her. "You ready so

soon? Jim, saddle Rex for Miss Lansell." He swung up into the saddle.

"Aren't you going to wait, Dick?"

"Can't. Milord can bring you." And Dick was away on the run.

Men were hurrying here and there, every move counting something done. While she stood there a wagon rattled out from the shadow of a haystack, with empty water-barrels dancing a mad jig behind the high seat, where the driver perched with feet braced and a whip in his hand. After him dashed four or five riders, silent and businesslike. In a moment they were mere fantastic shadows galloping up the hill through the smothery gloom.

Then came Jim, leading Rex and a horse for himself; Sir Redmond had saddled his gray and was waiting. Beatrice sprang into the saddle and took the lead, with nerves a-tingle. The wind that rushed against her face was hot and reeking with smoke. Her nostrils drank greedily the tang it carried.

"You gipsy!" cried Sir Redmond, peering at her through the murky gloom.

"This—is living!" she laughed, and urged Rex faster.

So they raced recklessly over the hills, toward

where the night was aglow. Before them the wagon pounded over untrailed prairie sod, with shadowy figures fleeing always before.

Here, wild cattle rushed off at either side, to stop and eye them curiously as they whirled past. There, a coyote, squatting unseen upon a distant pinnacle, howled, long-drawn and quavering, his weird protest against the solitudes in which he wandered.

The dusk deepened to dark, and they could no longer see the racing shadows. The rattle of the wagon came mysteriously back to them through the black.

Once Rex stumbled over a rock and came near falling, but Beatrice only laughed and urged him on, unheeding Sir Redmond's call to ride slower.

They splashed through a shallow creek, and came upon the wagon, halted that the cowboys might fill the barrels with water. Then they passed by, and when they heard them following the wagon no longer rattled glibly along, but chuckled heavily under its load.

The dull, red glow brightened to orange. Then, breasting at last a long hill, they came to the top, and Beatrice caught her breath at what lay below.

A jagged line of leaping flame cut clean through the dark of the coulee. The smoke piled rosily above and before, and the sullen roar of it clutched the senses—challenging, sinister. Creeping stealthily, relentlessly, here a thin gash of yellow hugging close to the earth, there a bold, bright wall of fire, it swept the coulée from rim to rim.

"The wind is carrying it from us," Sir Redmond was saying in her ear. "Are you afraid to stop here alone? I ought to go down and lend a hand."

Beatrice drew a long gasp. "Oh, no, I'm not afraid. Go; there is Dick, down there."

"You're sure you won't mind?" He hesitated, dreading to leave her.

"No, no! Go on—they need you."

Sir Redmond turned and rode down the ridge toward the flames. His straight figure was silhouetted sharply against the glow.

Beatrice slipped off her horse and sat down upon a rock, dead to everything but the fiendish beauty of the scene spread out below her. Millions of sparks danced in and out among the smoke wreaths which curled upward—now black, now red, now a dainty rose. Off to the left a coyote yapped shrilly, ending with his mournful howl.

Beatrice shivered from sheer ecstasy. This was a world she had never before seen—a world of hot, smoke-sodden wind, of dead-black shadows and flame-bright light; of roar and hoarse bellowing and sharp crackles; of calm, star-sprinkled sky above—and in the distance the uncanny howling of a coyote.

Time had no reckoning there. She saw men running to and fro in the glare, disappearing in a downward swirl of smoke, coming to view again in the open beyond. Always their arms waved rhythmically downward, beating the ragged line of yellow with water-soaked sacks. The trail they left was a wavering, smoke-traced rim of sullen black where before had been gay, dancing, orange light. In places the smolder fanned to new life behind them and licked greedily at the ripe grass like hungry, red tongues. One of these Beatrice watched curiously. It crept slyly into an unburned hollow, and the wind, veering suddenly, pushed it out of sight from the fighters and sent it racing merrily to the south. The main line of fire beat doggedly up against the wind that a minute before had been friendly, and fought bravely two foes instead of

one. It dodged, ducked, and leaped high, and the men beat upon it mercilessly.

But the little, new flame broadened and stood on tiptoes defiantly, proud of the wide, black trail that kept stretching away behind it; and Beatrice watched it, fascinated by its miraculous growth. It began to crackle and send up smoke wreaths of its own, with sparks dancing through; then its voice deepened and coarsened, till it roared quite like its mother around the hill.

The smoke from the larger fire rolled back with the wind, and Beatrice felt her eyes sting. Flakes of blackened grass and ashes rained upon the hill-top, and Rex moved uneasily and pawed at the dry sod. To him a prairie-fire was not beautiful—it was an enemy to run from. He twitched his reins from Beatrice's heedless fingers and decamped toward home, paying no attention whatever to the command of his mistress to stop.

Still Beatrice sat and watched the new fire, and was glad she chanced to be upon the south end of a sharp-nosed hill, so that she could see both ways. The blaze dove into a deep hollow, climbed the slope beyond, leaped exultantly and bellowed its challenge. And, of a sudden, dark forms sprang

upon it and beat it cruelly, and it went black where they struck, and only thin streamers of smoke told where it had been. Still they beat, and struck, and struck again, till the fire died ingloriously and the hillside to the south lay dark and still, as it had been at the beginning.

Beatrice wondered who had done it. Then she came back to her surroundings and realized that Rex had left her, and she was alone. She shivered —this time not in ecstasy, but partly from loneliness—and went down the hill toward where Dick and Sir Redmond and the others were fighting steadily the larger fire, unconscious of the younger, new one that had stolen away from them and was beaten to death around the hill.

Once in the coulee, she was compelled to take to the burnt ground, which crisped hotly under her feet and sent up a rank, suffocating smell of burned grass into her nostrils. The whole country was alight, and down there the world seemed on fire. At times the smoke swooped blindingly, and half-strangled her. Her skirts, in passing, swept the black ashes from grass roots which showed red in the night.

Picking her way carefully around the spots that

glowed warningly, shielding her face as well as she could from the smoke, she kept on until she was close upon the fighters. Dick and Sir Redmond were working side by side, the sacks they held rising and falling with the regularity of a machine for minutes at a time. A group of strange horsemen galloped up from the way she had come, followed by a wagon of water-barrels, careering recklessly over the uneven ground. The horsemen stopped just inside the burned rim, the horses sidestepping gingerly upon the hot turf.

"I guess you want some help here. Where shall we start in?" Beatrice recognized the voice. It was Keith Cameron.

"Sure, we do!" Dick answered, gratefully. "Start in any old place."

"I'm not sure we want your help," spoke the angry voice of Sir Redmond. "I take it you've already done a devilish sight too much."

"What do you mean by that?" Keith demanded; and then, by the silence, it seemed that every one knew. Beatrice caught her breath. Was this one of the ways Dick meant that Keith could fight?

"Climb down, boys, and get busy," Keith called to his men, after a few breaths. "This is for Dick.

Wait a minute! Pete, drive the wagon ahead, there. I guess we'd better begin on the other end and work this way. Come on—there's too much hot air here." They clattered on across the coulée, kicking hot ashes up for the wind to seize upon. Beatrice went slowly up to Dick, feeling all at once very tired and out of heart with it all.

"Dick," she called, in an anxious little voice, "Rex has run away from me. What shall I do?"

Dick straightened stiffly, his hands upon his aching loins, and peered through the smoke at her.

"I guess the only thing to do, then, is to get into the wagon over there. You can drive, Trix, if you want to, and that will give us another man here. I was just going to have some one take you home; now—the Lord only knows!—you're liable to have to stay till morning. Rex will go home, all right; you needn't worry about him."

He bent to the work again, and she could hear the wet sack thud, thud upon the ground. Other sacks and blankets went thud, thud, and down here at close range the fire was not so beautiful as it had been from the hilltop. Down here the glamour was gone. She climbed up to the high wagon seat and took the reins from the man, who immediately

seized upon a sack and went off to the fight. She felt that she was out of touch. She was out on the prairie at night, miles away from any house, driving a water-wagon for the men to put out a prairie-fire. She had driven a coaching-party once on a wager; but she had never driven a lumber-wagon with barrels of water before. She could not think of any girl she knew who had.

It was a new experience, certainly, but she found no pleasure in it; she was tired and sleepy, and her eyes and throat smarted cruelly with the smoke. She looked back to the hill she had just left, and it seemed a long, long time since she sat upon a rock up there and watched the little, new fire grow and grow, and the strange shadows spring up from nowhere and beat it vindictively till it died.

Again she wondered vaguely who had done it; not Keith Cameron, surely, for Sir Redmond had all but accused him openly of setting the range afire. Would he stamp out a blaze that was just reaching a size to do mischief, if left a little longer? No one would have seen it for hours, probably. He would undoubtedly have let it run, unless—— But who else could have set the fire? Who else would want to see the Pine Ridge country black and bar-

ren? Dick said Keith Cameron would not sit down and take his medicine—perhaps Dick knew he would do this thing.

As the fighters moved on across the coulée she drove the wagon to keep pace with them. Often a man would run up to the wagon, climb upon a wheel and dip a frayed gunny sack into a barrel, lift it out and run with it, all dripping, to the nearest point of the fire. Her part was to keep the wagon at the most convenient place. She began to feel the importance of her position, and to take pride in being always at the right spot. From the calm appreciation of the picturesque side, she drifted to the keen interest of the one who battles against heavy odds. The wind had veered again, and the flames rushed up the long coulée like an express-train. But the path it left was growing narrower every moment. Keith Cameron was doing grand work with his crew upon the other side, and the space between them was shortening perceptibly.

Beatrice found herself watching the work of the Cross men. If they were doing it for effect, they certainly were acting well their part. She wondered what would happen when the two crews met, and the danger was over. Would Sir Redmond call

Keith Cameron to account for what he had done? If he did, what would Keith say? And which side would Dick take? Very likely, she thought, he would defend Keith Cameron, and shield him if he could.

Beatrice found herself crying quietly, and shivering, though the air was sultry with the fire. For the life of her, she could not tell why she cried, but she tried to believe it was the smoke in her eyes. Perhaps it was.

The sky was growing gray when the two crews met. The orange lights were gone, and Dick, with a spiteful flop of the black rag which had been a good, new sack, stamped out the last tiny red tongue of the fire. The men stood about in awkward silence, panting with heat and weariness. Sir Redmond was ostentatiously filling his pipe. Beatrice knew him by his straight, soldierly pose. In the drab half-light they were all mere black outlines of men, and, for the most part, she could not distinguish one from another. Keith Cameron she knew instinctively by his slim height, and by the way he carried his head. Unconsciously, she leaned down from the high seat and listened for what would come next.

Keith seemed to be making a cigarette. A match flared and lighted his face for an instant, then was pinched out, and he was again only a black shape in the half-darkness.

"Well, I'm waiting for what you've got to say, Sir Redmond." His voice cut sharply through the silence. If he had known Beatrice was out there in the wagon he would have spoken lower, perhaps.

"I fancy I said all that is necessary just now," Sir Redmond answered calmly. "You know what I think. From now on I shall act."

"And what are you going to do, then?" Keith's voice was clear and unperturbed, as though he asked for the sake of being polite.

"That," retorted Sir Redmond, "is my own affair. However, since the matter concerns you rather closely, I will say that when I have the evidence I am confident I shall find, I shall seek the proper channels for retribution. There are laws in this country, aimed to protect a man's property, I take it. I warn you that I shall not spare—the guilty."

"Dick, it's up to you next. I want to know where you stand."

"At your back, Keith, right up to the finish. I know you; you fight fair."

"All right, then. I didn't think you'd go back on a fellow. And I tell you straight up, Sir Redmond Hayes, I'm not out touching matches to range land—not if it belonged to the devil himself. I've got some feeling for the dumb brutes that would have to suffer. You can get right to work hunting evidence, and be damned! You're dead welcome to all you can find; and in this part of the country you won't be able to buy much! You know very well you deserve to get your rope crossed, or you wouldn't be on the lookout for trouble. Come, boys; let's hit the trail. So long, Dick!"

Beatrice watched them troop off to their horses, heard them mount and go tearing off across the burned coulée bottom toward home. Dick came slowly over to her.

"I expect you're good and tired, sis. You've made a hand, all right, and helped us a whole lot, I can tell you. I'll drive now, and we'll hit the high places."

Beatrice smiled wanly. Not one of her Eastern acquaintances would have recognized Beatrice Lansell, the society beauty, in this remarkable-looking young woman, attired in a most haphazard fashion, with a face grimed like a chimney sweep, red eye-

lids drooping over tired, smarting eyes, and dishevéled, ash-filled hair topped by a man's gray felt hat. When she smiled her teeth shone dead white, like a negro's.

Dick regarded her critically, one foot on the wheel hub. "Where did you get hold of Keith Cameron's hat?" he inquired.

Beatrice snatched the hat from her head with childish petulance, and looked as if she were going to throw it viciously upon the ground. If her face had been clean Dick might have seen how the blood had rushed into her cheeks; as it was, she was safe behind a mask of soot. She placed the hat back upon her head, feeling, privately, a bit foolish.

"I supposed it was yours. I took it off the hall-tree." The dignity of her tone was superb, but, unfortunately, it did not match her appearance of rakish vagabondage.

Dick grinned through a deep layer of soot. "Well, it happens to be Keith's. He lost it in the wind the other day, and I found it and took it home. It's too bad you've worn his hat all night and didn't know it. You ought to see yourself! Your own mother won't know you, Trix."

"I can't look any worse than you do. A negro

would be white by comparison. Do get in, so we can start! I'm tired to death, and half-starved." After these unamiable remarks, she refused to open her lips.

They drove silently in the gray of early morning, and the empty barrels danced monotonously their fantastic jig in the back of the wagon. Sooty-faced cowboys galloped wearily over the prairie before them, and Sir Redmond rode moodily alongside.

Of a truth, the glamour was gone.

CHAPTER XI.

Sir Redmond Waits His Answer.

Beatrice felt distinctly out of sorts the next day, and chose an hour for her ride when she felt reasonably secure from unwelcome company. But when she went out into the sunshine there was Sir Redmond waiting with Rex and his big gray. Beatrice was not exactly elated at the sight, but she saw nothing to do but smile and make the best of it. She wanted to be alone, so that she could dream along through the hills she had learned to love, and think out some things which troubled her, and decide just how she had best go about winning Rex for herself; it had become quite necessary to her peace of mind that she should teach Dick and Keith Cameron a much-needed lesson.

"It has been so long since we rode together," he apologized. "I hope you don't mind my coming along."

"Oh, no! Why should I mind?" Beatrice smiled upon him in friendly fashion. She liked Sir Red-

mond very much—only she hoped he was not going to make love. Somehow, she did not feel in the mood for love-making just then.

"I don't know why, I'm sure. But you seem rather fond of riding about these hills by yourself. One should never ask why women do things, I fancy. It seems always to invite disaster."

"Does it?" Beatrice was not half-listening. They were passing, just then, the suburbs of a "dog town," and she was never tired of watching the prairie-dogs stand upon their burrows, chip-chip defiance until fear overtook their impertinence, and then dive headlong deep into the earth. "I do think a prairie-dog is the most impudent creature alive—and the most shrewish. I never pass but I am scolded by these little scoundrels till my ears burn. What do you think they say?"

"They're probably inviting you to stop with them and be their queen, and are scolding because your heart is hard and you only laugh and ride on."

"Queen of a prairie-dog town! Dear me! Why this plaintive mood?"

"Am I plaintive? I do not mean to be, I'm sure."

"You don't appear exactly hilarious," she told him. "I can't see what is getting the matter with

us all. Mama and your sister are poor company, even for each other, and Dick is like a bear. One can't get a civil word out of him. I'm not exactly amiable, myself, either; but I relied upon you to keep the mental temperature up to normal, Sir Redmond."

"Perhaps it's a good thing we shall not stop here much longer. I must confess I don't fancy the country—and Mary is downright homesick. She wants to get back to her parish affairs; she's afraid some rheumatic old woman needs coddling with jelly and wine, and that sort of thing. I've promised to hurry through the business here, and take her home. But I mean to see that Pine Ridge fence in place before I go; or, at least, see it well under way."

"I'm sure Dick will attend to it properly," Beatrice remarked, with pink cheeks. If she remembered what she had threatened to tell Sir Redmond, she certainly could not have asked for a better opportunity. She was reminding herself at that moment that she always detested a tale bearer.

"Your brother Dick is a fine fellow, and I have every confidence in him; but you must see yourself that he is swayed, more or less, by his friendship

for—his neighbors. It is only a kindness to take the responsibility off his shoulders till the thing is done. I'm sure he will feel better to have it so."

"Yes," she agreed; "I think you're right. Dick always was very soft-hearted, and, right or wrong, he clings to his friends." Then, rather hastily, as though anxious to change the trend of the conversation: "Of course, your sister will insist on keeping Dorman with her. I shall miss that little scamp dreadfully, I'm afraid." The next minute she saw that she had only opened a subject she dreaded even more.

"It is something to know that there is even one of us that you will miss," Sir Redmond observed. Something in his tone hurt.

"I shall miss you all," she said hastily. "It has been a delightful summer."

"I wish I might know just what element made it delightful. I wish——"

"I scarcely think it has been any particular element," she broke in, trying desperately to stave off what she felt in his tone. "I love the wild, where I can ride, and ride, and never meet a human being—where I can dream and dally and feast my eyes

on a landscape man has not touched. I have lived most of my life in New York, and I love nature so well that I'm inclined to be jealous of her. I want her left free to work out all her whims in her own way. She has a keen sense of humor, I think. The way she modeled some of these hills proves that she loves her little jokes. I have seen where she cut deep, fearsome gashes, with sides precipitous, as though she had some priceless treasure hidden away in the deep, where man cannot despoil it. And if you plot and plan, and try very hard, you may reach the bottom at last and find the treasure—nothing. Or, perhaps, a tiny little stream, as jealously guarded as though each drop were priceless."

Sir Redmond rode for a few minutes in silence. When he spoke, it was abruptly.

"And is that all? Is there nothing to this delightful summer, after all, but your hills?"

"Oh, of course, I—it has all been delightful. I shall hate to go back home, I think." Beatrice was a bit startled to find just how much she would hate to go back and wrap herself once more in the conventions of society life. For the first time since she could remember, she wanted her world to stand still.

Sir Redmond went doggedly to the point he had in mind and heart.

"I hoped, Beatrice, you would count me, too. I've tried to be patient. You know, don't you, that I love you?"

"You've certainly told me often enough," she retorted, in a miserable attempt at her old manner.

"And you've put me off, and laughed at me, and did everything under heaven but answer me fairly. And I've acted the fool, no doubt. I know it. I've no courage before a woman. A curl of your lip, and I was ready to cut and run. But I can't go on this way forever—I've got to know. I wish I could talk as easy as I can fight; I'd have settled the thing long ago. Where other men can plead their cause, I can say just the one thing—I love you, Beatrice. When I saw you first, in the carriage—I loved you then. You had some fur—brown fur—snuggled under your chin, and the pink of your cheeks, and your dear, brown eyes shining and smiling above—— Good God! I've always loved you! From the beginning of the world, I think! I'd be good to you, Beatrice, and I believe I could make you happy—if you give me the chance."

Something in Beatrice's throat ached cruelly. It

was the truth, and she knew it. He did love her, and the love of a brave man is not a thing to be thrust lightly aside. But it demanded such a lot in return! More, perhaps, than she could give. A love like that—a love that gives everything—demands everything in return. Anything less insults it.

She stole a glance at him. Sir Redmond was looking straight before him, with the fixed gaze that sees nothing. There was the white line around his mouth which Beatrice had seen once before. Again that griping ache was in her throat, till she could have cried out with the pain of it. She wanted to speak, to say something—anything—which would drive that look from his face.

While her mind groped among the jumble of words that danced upon her tongue, and that seemed, all of them, so pitifully weak and inadequate, she heard the galloping hoofs of a horse pounding close behind. A choking cloud of dust swept down upon them, and Keith, riding in the midst, reined out to pass. He lifted his hat. His eyes challenged Beatrice, swept coldly the face of her companion, and turned again to the trail. He swung his heels backward, and Redcloud broke

again into the tireless lope that carried him far ahead, until there was only a brown dot speeding over the prairie.

Sir Redmond waited until Keith was far beyond hearing, then he filled his lungs deeply and looked at Beatrice. "Don't you feel you could trust me—and love me a little?"

Beatrice was deadly afraid she was going to cry, and she hated weeping women above all things. "A little wouldn't do," she said, with what firmness she could muster. "I should want to love you as much —quite as much as you deserve, Sir Redmond, or not at all. I'm afraid I can't. I wish I could, though. I—I think I should like to love you; but perhaps I haven't much heart. I like you very much—better than I ever liked any one before; but—— Oh, I wish you wouldn't insist on an answer! I don't know, myself, how I feel. I wish you had not asked me—yet. I tried not to let you."

"A man can keep his heart still for a certain time, Beatrice, but not for always. Some time he will say what his heart commands, if the chance is given him; the woman can't hold him back. I did wait and wait, because I thought you weren't ready for

me to speak. And—you don't care for anybody else?"

"Of course I don't. But I hate to give up my freedom to any one, Sir Redmond. I want to be free—free as the wind that blows here always, and changes and changes, and blows from any point that suits its whim, without being bound to any rule."

"Do you think I'm an ogre, that will lock you in a dungeon, Beatrice? Can't you see that I am not threatening your freedom? I only want the right to love you, and make you happy. I should not ask you to go or stay where you did not please, and —I'd be good to you, Beatrice!"

"I don't think it would matter," cried Beatrice, "if you weren't. I should love you because I couldn't help myself. I hate doing things by rule, I tell you. I couldn't care for you because you were good to me, and I ought to care; it must be because I can't help myself. And I——" She stopped and shut her teeth hard together; she felt sure she should cry in another minute if this went on.

"I believe you do love me, Beatrice, and your rebellious young American nature dreads surrender." He tried to look into her eyes and smile, but

she kept her eyes looking straight ahead. Then Sir Redmond made the biggest blunder of his life, out of the goodness of his heart, and because he hated to tease her into promising anything.

"I won't ask you to tell me now, Beatrice," he said gently. "I want you to be sure; I never could forgive myself if you ever felt you had made a mistake. A week from to-night I shall ask you once more—and it will be for the last time. After that—— But I won't think—I daren't think what it would be like if you say no. Will you tell me then, Beatrice?"

The heart of Beatrice jumped into her throat. At that minute she was very near to saying yes, and having done with it. She was quite sure she knew, then, what her answer would be in a week. The smile she gave him started Sir Redmond's blood to racing exultantly. Her lips parted a little, as if a word were there, ready to be spoken; but she caught herself back from the decision. Sir Redmond had voluntarily given her a week; well, then, she would take it, to the last minute.

"Yes, I'll tell you a week from to-night, after dinner. I'll race you home, Sir Redmond—the first one through the big gate by the stable wins!" She

struck Rex a blow that made him jump, and darted off down the trail that led home, and her teasing laugh was the last Sir Redmond heard of her that day; for she whipped into a narrow gulch when the first turn hid her from him, and waited until he had thundered by. After that she rode complacently deep into the hills, wickedly pleased at the trick she had played him.

Every day during the week that followed she slipped away from him and rode away by herself, resolved to enjoy her freedom to the full while she had it; for after that, she felt, things would never be quite the same.

Every day, when Dick had chance for a quiet word with her, he wanted to know who owned Rex —till at last she lost her temper and told him plainly that, in her opinion, Keith Cameron had left the country for two reasons, instead of one. (For Keith, be it known, had not been seen since the day he passed her and Sir Redmond on the trail.) Beatrice averred that she had a poor opinion of a man who would not stay and face whatever was coming.

There was just one day left in her week of freedom, and Dick still owned Rex, with the chances all in his favor for continuing to do so. Still, Bea-

trice was vindictively determined upon one point. Let Keith Cameron cross her path, and she would do something she had never done before; she would deliberately lead him on to propose—if the fellow had nerve enough to do so, which, she told Dick, she doubted.

CHAPTER XII.

Held Up by Mr. Kelly.

" 'Traveler, what lies over the hill?' " questioned a mischievous voice.

Keith, dreaming along a winding, rock-strewn trail in the cañon, looked up quickly and beheld his Heart's Desire sitting calmly upon her horse, ten feet before Redcloud's nose, watching him amusedly. Redcloud must have been dreaming also, or he would have whinnied warning and welcome with the same breath.

" 'Traveler, tell to me,' " she went on, seeing Keith only stared.

Keith, not to be outdone, searched his memory hurriedly for the reply which should rightly follow; secretly he was amazed at her sudden friendliness.

" 'Child, there's a valley over there'—but it isn't 'pretty and wooded and shy'—not what you can notice. And there isn't any 'little town,' either, unless you go a long way. Why?" Keith rested his

gloved hands, one above the other, on the saddle horn, and let his eyes riot with the love that was in him. He had not seen his Heart's Desire for a week. A week? It seemed a thousand years! And here she was before him, unusually gracious.

"Why? I discovered that hill two hours ago, it seems to me, and it wasn't more than a mile off. I want to see what lies on the other side. I feel sure no man ever stood upon the top and looked down. It is my hill—mine by the right of discovery. But I've been going, and going, and I think it's rather farther away, if anything, than it was before."

"Good thing I met you," Keith declared, and he looked as if he meant it. "You're probably lost, right now, and don't know it. Which way is home?"

Beatrice smiled a superior smile, and pointed.

"I thought so," grinned Keith joyously. "You're pointing straight toward Claggett."

"It doesn't matter," said Beatrice, "since you know, and you're here. The important thing is to get to the top of that hill."

"What for?" Keith questioned.

"Why, to be there!" Beatrice opened her big

eyes at him. "That," she declared whimsically, "is the top of the world, and it is mine. I found it. I want to go up there and look down."

"It's an unmerciful climb," Keith demurred hypocritically, to strengthen her resolution.

"All the better. I don't value what comes easily."

"You won't see anything, except more hills."

"I love hills—and more hills."

"You're a long way from home, and it's after one o'clock."

"I have a lunch with me, and I often stay out until dinner time."

Keith gave a sigh that shook the saddle, making up, in volume, what it lacked in sincerity. The blood in him was a-jump at the prospect of leading his Heart's Desire up next the clouds—up where the world was yet young. A man in love is fond of self-torture.

"I have not said you must go." Beatrice answered with the sigh.

"You don't have to," he retorted. "It is a self-evident fact. Who wants to go prowling around these hills by night, with a lantern that smokes and has an evil smell, losing sleep and yowling like a

bunch of coyotes, hunting a misguided young woman who thinks north is south, and can't point straight up?"

"You draw a flattering picture, Mr. Cameron."

"It's realistic. Do you still insist upon getting up there, for the doubtful pleasure of looking down?" Secretly, he hoped so.

"Certainly."

"Then I shall go with you."

"You need not. I can go very well by myself, Mr. Cameron."

Beatrice was something of a hypocrite herself.

"I shall go where duty points the way."

"I hope it points toward home, then."

"It doesn't, though. It takes the trail you take."

"I never yet allowed my wishes to masquerade as Disagreeable Duty, with two big D's," she told him tartly, and started off.

"Say! If you're going up that hill, this is the trail. You'll bump up against a straight cliff if you follow that path."

Beatrice turned with seeming reluctance and allowed him to guide her, just as she had intended he should do.

"Dick tells me you have been away," she began suavely.

"Yes. I've just got back from Fort Belknap," he explained quietly, though he must have known his absence had been construed differently. "I've rented pasturage on the reservation for every hoof I own. Great grass over there—the whole prairie like a hay meadow, almost, and little streams everywhere."

"You are very fortunate," Beatrice remarked politely.

"Luck ought to come my way once in a while. I don't seem to get more than my share, though."

"Dick will be glad to know you have a good range for your cattle, Mr. Cameron."

"I expect he will. You may tell him, for me, that Jim Worthington—he's the agent over there, and was in college with us—says I can have my cattle there as long as he's running the place."

"Why not tell him yourself?" Beatrice asked.

"I don't expect to be over to the Pool ranch for a while." Keith's tone was significant, and Beatrice dropped the subject.

"Been fishing lately?" he asked easily, as though he had not left her that day in a miff.

"No. Dorman is fickle, like all male creatures. Dick brought him two little brown puppies the other day, and now he can hardly be dragged from the woodshed to his meals. I believe he would eat and sleep with them if his auntie would allow him to."

The trail narrowed there, and they were obliged to ride single file, which was not favorable to conversation. Thus far, Beatrice thought, she was a long way from winning her wager; but she did not worry—she looked up to where the hill towered above them, and smiled.

"We'll have to get off and lead our horses over this spur," he told her, at last. "Once on the other side, we can begin to climb. Still in the humor to tackle it?"

"To be sure I am. After all this trouble I shall not turn back."

"All right," said Keith, inwardly shouting. If his Heart's Desire wished to take a climb that would last a good two hours, he was not there to object. He led her up a steep, rock-strewn ridge and into a hollow. From there the hill sloped smoothly upward.

"I'll just anchor these cayuses to a rock, to make

dead-sure of them," Keith remarked. "It wouldn't be fun to be set afoot out here; now, would it? How would you like the job of walking home, eh?"

"I don't think I'd enjoy it much," Beatrice said, showing her one dimple conspicuously. "I'd rather ride."

"Throw up your hands!" growled a voice from somewhere.

Keith wheeled toward the sound, and a bullet spatted into the yellow clay, two inches from the toe of his boot. Also a rifle cracked sharply. He took the hint, and put his hands immediately on a level with his hat crown.

"No use," he called out ruefully. "I haven't anything to return the compliment with."

"Well, I've got t' have the papers fur that, mister," retorted the voice, and a man appeared from the shelter of a rock and came slowly down to them—a man, long-legged and lank, with haggard, unshaven face and eyes that had hunger and dogged endurance looking out. He picked his way carefully with his feet, his eyes and the rifle fixed unswervingly at the two. Beatrice was too astonished to make a sound.

"What sort of a hold-up do you call this?" de-

manded Keith hotly, his hands itching to be down and busy. "We don't carry rolls of money around in the hills, you fool!"

"Oh, damn your money!" the man said roughly. "I've got money t' burn. I want t' trade horses with yuh. That roan, there, looks like a stayer. I'll take him."

"Well, seeing you seem to be head push here, I guess it's a trade," Keith answered. "But I'll thank you for my own saddle."

Beatrice, whose hands were up beside her ears, and not an inch higher, changed from amazed curiosity to concern. "Oh, you mustn't take Redcloud away from Mr. Cameron!" she protested. "You don't know—he's so fond of that horse! You may take mine; he's a good horse—he's a perfectly splendid horse, but I—I'm not so attached to him."

The fellow stopped and looked at her—not, however, forgetting Keith, who was growing restive. Beatrice's cheeks were very pink, and her eyes were bright and big and earnest. He could not look into them without letting some of the sternness drop out of his own.

"I wish you'd please take Rex—I'd rather trade than not," she coaxed. When Beatrice coaxed,

mere man must yield or run. The fellow was but human, and he was not in a position to run, so he grinned and wavered.

"It's fair to say you'll get done," he remarked, his eyes upon the odd little dimple at the corner of her mouth, as if he had never seen anything quite so fetching.

"Your horse won't—er—buck, will he?" she ventured doubtfully. This was her first horse trade, and it behooved her to be cautious, even at the point of a rifle.

"Well, no," said the man laconically; "he won't. He's dead."

"Oh!" Beatrice gasped and blushed. She might have known, she thought, that the fellow would not take all this trouble if his horse was in a condition to buck. Then: "My elbows hurt. I—I think I should like to sit down."

"Sure," said the man politely. "Make yourself comfortable. I ain't used t' dealin' with ladies. But you got t' set still, yuh know, and not try any tricks. I can put up a mighty swift gun play when I need to—and your bein' a lady wouldn't cut no ice in a case uh that kind."

"Thank you." Beatrice sat down upon the near-

est rock, folded her hands meekly and looked from him to Keith, who seemed to claim a good deal of the man's attention. She observed that, at a long breath from Keith, his captor was instantly alert.

"Maybe your elbows ache, too," he remarked dryly. "They'll git over it, though; I've knowed a man t' grab at the clouds upwards of an hour, an' no harm done."

"That's encouraging, I'm sure." Keith shifted to the other foot.

"How's that sorrel?" demanded the man. "Can he go?"

Keith hesitated a second.

"Indeed he can go!" put in Beatrice eagerly. "He's every bit as good as Redcloud."

"Is that sorrel yours?" The man's eyes shifted briefly to her face.

"No-o." Beatrice, thinking how she had meant to own him, blushed.

"That accounts for it." He laughed unpleasantly. "I wondered why you was so dead anxious t' have me take him."

The eyes of Beatrice snapped sparks at him, but her manner was demure, not to say meek. "He

belongs to my brother," she explained, "and my brother has dozens of. good saddle-horses. Mr. Cameron's horse is a pet. It's different when a horse follows you all over the place and fairly talks to you. He'll shake hands, and——"

"Uh-huh, I see the point, I guess. What d'yuh say, kid?"

Keith might seem boyish, but he did not enjoy being addressed as "kid." He was twenty-eight years old, whether he looked it or not.

"I say this: If you take my horse, I'll kill you. I'll have twenty-five cow-punchers camping on your trail before sundown. If you take this girl's horse, I'll do the same."

The man shut his lips in a thin line.

"No, he won't!" cried Beatrice, leaning forward. "Don't mind a thing he says! You can't expect a man to keep his temper with his hands up in the air like that. You take Rex, and I'll promise for Mr. Cameron——"

"Trix—Miss Lansell!"—sternly.

"I promise you he won't do a thing," she went on firmly. "He—he isn't half as fierce, really, as—as he looks."

Keith's face got red.

The man laughed a little. Evidently the situation amused him, whether the others could see the humor of it or not. "So I'm to have your cayuse, eh?"

Keith saw two big tears tipping over her lower lids, and gritted his teeth.

"Well, it ain't often I git a chance t' please a lady," the fellow decided. "I guess Rex'll do, all right. Go over and change saddles, youngster—and don't git gay. I've got the drop, and yuh notice I'm keeping it."

"Are you going to take his saddle?" Beatrice stood up and clinched her hands, looking very much as if she would like to pull his hair. Keith in trouble appealed to her strangely.

"Sure thing. It's a peach, from the look of it. Mine's over the hill a piece. Step along there, kid! I want t' be movin'."

"You'll need to go some!" flared Keith, over his shoulder.

"I expect t' go some," retorted the man. "A fellow with three sheriff's possys campin' on his trail ain't apt t' loiter none."

"Oh!" Beatrice sat down and stared. "Then you must be——"

"Yep," the fellow laughed recklessly. "You can tell your maw yuh met up with Kelly, the darin' train-robber. I wouldn't be s'prised if she close-herded yuh fer a spell till her scare wears off. But I've hung around these parts long enough. I fooled them sheriffs a-plenty, stayin' here. Gee! you're swift—I don't think!" This last sentence was directed at Keith, who was putting a snail to shame and making it appear he was in a hurry.

"Git a move on!" commanded Kelly, threatening with his eyes.

Keith wisely made no reply—nor did he show any symptoms of haste, despite the menacing tone. Slowly he pulled his saddle off Redcloud, and carefully he placed it upon the ground. When a fellow lives in his saddle, almost, he comes to think a great deal of it, and he is reluctant under any circumstances, to surrender it to another; to have a man deliberately confiscate it with the authority which lies in a lump of lead the size of a child's thumb is not pleasant.

Through Keith's brain flashed a dozen impracticable plans, and one that offered a slender—a very slender—chance of success. If he could get a little closer! He moved over beside Rex and,

unbuckling the cinch of Beatrice's saddle, pulled it sullenly off.

"Now, put your saddle on that there Rex horse, and cinch it tight!"

Keith picked up the saddle—his saddle, and threw it across Rex's back, raging inwardly at his helplessness. To lose his saddle—worse, to let Beatrice lose her horse—— Lord! a pretty figure he must cut in her eyes!

"Dry weather we're havin'," Kelly remarked politely to Beatrice; without, however, looking in her direction. "Prairie fires are gittin' t' be the regular thing, I notice."

Beatrice studied his face, and found no ulterior purpose for the words.

"Yes," she agreed, as pleasantly as she could, in view of the disquieting circumstances. "I helped fight a prairie-fire last week over this way. We were out all night."

"Prairie-fires is mean things t' handle, oncet they git started. I always hate t' see 'em git hold of the grass. What fire was that you mention?"

Beatrice glanced toward Keith, and was thankful his back was turned to her. But a quick suspicion

had come to her, and she went steadily on with the subject.

"It was the Pine Ridge country. It started very mysteriously——"

"It wasn't no mystery t' me." Kelly laughed grimly. "I started that there blaze myself accidentally. I throwed a cigarette down, thinkin' it had gone out. After a while I seen a blaze where I'd jest left, but I didn't have no license t' go back an' put it out—my orders was to git out uh that. I seen the sky all lit up that night. Kid, are yuh goin' t' sleep?"

Keith started. He had been listening, and thanking his lucky star that Beatrice was listening also. If she had suspected him of setting the range afire, she knew better now. A weight lifted off Keith's shoulders, and he stood a bit straighter; those chance words meant a great deal to him, and he felt that he would not grudge his saddle in payment. But Rex—that was another matter. Beatrice should not lose him if he could prevent it; still, what could he do?

He might turn and spring upon Kelly, but in the meantime Kelly would not be idle; he would probably be pumping bullets out of the rifle into Keith's

body—and he would still have the horse. He stole a glance at Beatrice, and went hot all over at what he thought he read in her eyes. For once he was not glad to be near his Heart's Desire; he wished her elsewhere—anywhere but sitting on that rock, over there, with her little, gloved hands folded quietly in her lap, and that adorable, demure look on her face—the look which would have put her mother instantly upon the defensive—and a gleam in her eyes Keith read for scorn.

Surely he might do something! Barely six feet now separated him from Kelly. If one of those lumps of rock that strewed the ground was in his hand—he stooped to reach under Rex's body for the cinch, and could almost feel Kelly's eyes boring into his back. A false move—well, Keith had heard of Kelly a good many times; if this fellow was really the man he claimed to be, Keith did not need to guess what would follow a suspicious move; he knew. He looked stealthily toward him, and Kelly's eyes met his with a gleam sinister.

Kelly grinned. "I wouldn't, kid," he said softly.

Keith swore in a whisper, and his fingers closed upon the cinch. It was no use to fight the devil with cunning, he thought, bitterly.

Just then Beatrice gave an unearthly screech, that made the horses' knees bend under them. When Keith whirled to see what it was, she was standing upon the rock, with her skirts held tightly around her, like the pictures of women when a mouse gets into the room.

"Oh, Mr. Cameron! A sn-a-a-ke!"

Came a metallic br-r-r, the unmistakable war cry of the rattler. Into Kelly's eyes came a look of fear, and he sidled gingerly. The buzz had sounded unpleasantly close to his heels. For one brief instant the cold eye of his rifle regarded harmlessly the hillside. During that instant a goodly piece of sandstone whinged under his jaw, and he went down, with Keith upon him like a mountain lion. The latter snatched the rifle and got up hurriedly, for he had not forgotten the rattler. Kelly lay looking up at him in a dazed way that might have been funny at any other time.

"I wondered if you were good at grasping opportunities," said Beatrice. When he looked, there she was, sitting down on the rock, with her little, gloved hands folded in her lap, and that adorable demure look on her face; and a gleam in her eyes

he knew was not scorn, though he could not rightly tell what it really did mean.

Keith wondered at her vaguely, but a man can't have his mind on a dozen things at once. It was important that he keep a sharp watch on Kelly, and his eyes were searching for a gleaming, gray-spotted coil which he felt to be near.

"You needn't look, Mr. Cameron. There isn't any snake. It—it was I."

"You!" Keith's jaw dropped.

"Look out, Mr. Cameron. It wouldn't work a second time, I'm afraid."

Keith turned back before Kelly had more than got to his elbow; plainly Kelly was not feeling well just then. He looked unhappy, and rather sick.

"If you'll hand me the gun, Mr. Cameron, I think I can hold it steady while you fix the saddles. And then we'll go home. I—I don't think I really care to—climb the hill."

What Keith wanted to do was to take her in his arms and kiss her till he was tired. What he did do was back toward her, and let her take the rifle quickly and deftly from his hands. She rested the gun upon her knee, and brought it to bear upon Mr. Kelly with a composure not assuring to that

gentleman, and she tried to look as if she really and truly would shoot a man—and managed to look only the more kissable.

"Don't squirm, Mr. Kelly. I won't bite, if I do buzz sometimes."

Kelly stared at her meditatively a minute, and said: "Well, I'll be damned!"

Keith looked at her also, but he did not say anything.

The way he slapped his saddle back upon Redcloud and cinched it, and saddled Rex, was a pretty exhibition of precision and speed, learned in round-up camps. Kelly watched him grimly.

"I knowed you wasn't as swift as yuh knew how 't be, a while back," he commented. "I've got this t' say fur you two: You're a little the toughest proposition I ever run up ag'inst—and I've been up ag'inst it good and plenty."

"Thanks," Keith said cheerfully. "You'd better take Rex now and go ahead, Miss Lansell. I'll take that gun and look after this fellow. Get up, Kelly."

"What are you going to do with him?"

Kelly got unsteadily upon his feet. Beatrice

looked at him, and then at Keith. She asked a question.

"March him home, and send him in to the nearest sheriff." Keith was businesslike, and his tone was crisp.

Beatrice's eyes turned again to Kelly. He did not whine, or beg, or even curse. He stood looking straight before him, at something only his memory could see, and in his face was weariness, and a deep loneliness, and a certain, grim despair. There was an ugly bruise where the rock had struck, but the rest of his face was drawn and white.

"If you do that," cried Beatrice, in a voice hardly more than a fierce whisper, "I shall hate you always. You are not a man-hunter. Let him stay here, and take his chance in the hills."

Keith was not a hard man to persuade into being merciful. "It's easy enough to say yes, Miss Lansell. I always was chicken-hearted when a fellow seemed down on his luck. You can stay here, Kelly —I don't want you, anyway." He laughed boyishly and irresponsibly, for he felt that Kelly had done him a service that day.

Beatrice flashed him a smile that went to his head and made him dizzy, and took up Rex's bridle

rein. She hesitated, looked doubtfully at Kelly, who stood waiting stoically, and turned to her saddle. She untied a bundle and went quickly over to him.

"You—I don't want my lunch, after all. I'm going home now. I—I want you to take it, please. There are some sandwiches—with veal loaf, that Looey Sam makes deliciously—and some cake. I—I wish it was more. I know you'll like the veal loaf."

Kelly looked down at her, and God knows what thoughts were in his mind. He did not answer her with words; he just swallowed hard.

"Poor devil!" was what Keith said to himself, and the gun he was holding threatened, for a minute, to wing a cloud.

Beatrice laid the package in Kelly's unresisting hand, looked up into his averted face and said simply: "Good-by, Mr. Kelly."

After that she hurried Rex up the steep ridge much faster than she had gone down it, endangering his bones and putting herself very empty-lunged.

At the top of the ridge Keith stopped and looked down.

"Hi, Kelly!"

Kelly showed that he heard.

"Here's your gun, on this rock. You can come up and get it, if you want to. And—say! I've got a few broke horses ranging down here somewhere. VN brand, on left shoulder. I won't scour the hills, very bad, if I should happen to miss a cayuse. So long!"

Kelly waved his hand for farewell.

CHAPTER XIII.

Keith's Masterful Wooing.

Keith faced toward home, with Redcloud following at his heels like a pet dog. For some reason, which he did not try to analyze, he was feeling light of heart—as though something very nice had happened to him. It might have been the unexpected clearing up of the mystery of the prairie-fire, though he was not dwelling particularly upon that. He was thinking a great deal more of Beatrice's blue-brown eyes, which had never been more baffling, so far as he knew. And his blood was still dancing with the smile she had given him; it hardly seemed possible that a girl could smile just like that and not mean anything.

When he reached the level, where she was waiting for him, he saw that she had her arms around the neck of her horse, and that she was crying dismally, heart-brokenly, with an abandon that took no thought of his presence. Keith had never seen a girl cry like that before. He had seen them dab

at their eyes with their handkerchief, and smile the next breath—but this was different. For a minute he didn't quite know what to do; he could hear the blood hammering against his temples while he stood dumbly watching her. He went hesitatingly up, and laid a gloved hand deprecatingly upon her shoulder.

"Don't do that, Miss Lansell! The fellow isn't worth it. He's only living the life he chose for himself, and he doesn't mind, not half as much as you imagine. I know how you feel—I felt sorry for him myself—but he doesn't deserve it, you know." He stopped; not being able, just at the moment, to think of anything more to say about Kelly. Beatrice, who had not been thinking of Kelly at all, but remorsefully of a fellow she had persisted in misjudging, only cried the harder.

"Don't—don't cry like that! I—Miss Lansell—Trix—darling!" Keith's self-control snapped suddenly, like a rope when the strain becomes too great. He caught her fiercely in his arms, and crushed her close against him.

Beatrice stopped crying, and gasped.

"Trixie, if you must cry, I wish you'd cry for me. I'm about as miserable a man—I want you

so! God made you for me, and I'm starving for the feel of your lips on mine." Then Keith, who was nothing if not daring, once he was roused, bent and kissed her without waiting to see if he might—and not only once, but several times.

Beatrice made a half-hearted attempt to get free of his arms, but Keith was not a fool—he held her closer, and laughed from pure, primitive joy.

"Mr. Cameron!" It was Beatrice's voice, but it had never been like that before.

"I think you might call me Keith," he cut in. "You've got to begin some time, and now is as good a time as any."

"You—you're taking a good deal for granted," she said, wriggling unavailingly in his arms.

"A man's got to, with a girl like you. You're so used to turning a fellow down I believe you'd do it just from habit."

"Indeed?" She was trying to be sarcastic and got kissed for her pains.

"Yes, 'indeed.'" He mimicked her tone. "I want you. I want you! I wanted you long before I ever saw you. And so I'm not taking any chances—I didn't dare, you see. I just had to take you first, and ask you afterward."

Beatrice laughed a little, with tears very close to her lashes, and gave up. What was the use of trying to resist this masterful fellow, who would not even give her a chance to refuse him? She did not know quite how to say no to a man who did not ask her to say yes. But the queer part, to her, was the feeling that she would have hated to say no, anyway. It never occurred to her, till afterward, that she might have stood upon a pedestal of offended dignity and cried, "Unhand me, villain!"—and that, if she had, Keith would undoubtedly have complied instantly. As it was, she just laughed softly, and blushed a good deal.

"I believe mama is right about you, after all," she said wickedly. "At heart, you're a bold highwayman."

"Maybe. I know I'd not stand and see some other fellow walk off with my Heart's Desire, without putting up a fight. It did look pretty blue for me, though, and I was afraid—but it's all right now, isn't it? Possession is nine points in law, they say, and I've got you now! I'm going to keep you, too. When are you going to come over and take charge of the Cross ranch?"

"Dear me!" said Beatrice, snuggling against his

shoulder, and finding it the best place in the world to be. "I never said I was going to take charge at all!" Then the impulse of confession seized her. "Will you hate me, if I tell you something?"

"I expect I will," Keith assented, his eyes positively idolatrous. "What is it, girlie?"

"Well, I—it was Dick's fault; I never would have thought of such a thing if he hadn't goaded me into it—but—well, I was going to make you propose, on a wager——" The brown head of Beatrice went down out of sight, on his arm. "I was going to refuse you—and get Rex——"

"I know." Keith held her closer than ever. "Dick rode over and told me that day. And I wasn't going to give you a chance, missy. If you hadn't started to cry, here—— Oh! what's the use? You didn't refuse me—and you're not going to, either, are you, girlie?"

Beatrice intimated that there was no immediate danger of such a thing happening.

"You see, Dick and I felt that you belonged to me, by rights. I fell in love with a picture of you, that you sent him—that one taken in your graduation gown—and I told Dick I was going to take

the next train East, and carry you off by force, if I couldn't get you any other way. But Dick thought I'd stand a better show to wait till he'd coaxed you out here. We had it all fixed, that you'd come and find a prairie knight that was ready to fight for you, and he'd make you like him, whether you wanted to or not; and then he'd keep you here, and we'd all be happy ever after. And Dick would pull out of the Northern Pool—and of course you would—and we'd have a company of our own. Oh! we had some great castles built out here on the prairie, let me tell you! And then, when you finally came here, you had milord tagging along—and you thinking you were in love with him! Maybe you think I wasn't shaky, girlie! The air castles got awfully wobbly, and it looked like they were going to cave in on us. But I was bound to stay in the game if I could, and Dick did all he could to get you to looking my way—and it's all right, isn't it, Trixie?" Keith kept recurring to the ecstatic realization that it was all right.

Beatrice meditated for a minute.

"I never dreamed—Dick never even mentioned you in any of his letters," she said, in a rather dazed tone. "And when I came he made me be-

lieve you were a horrible flirt, and I never can resist the temptation to measure lances——"

"And take a fall out of a male flirt," Keith supplemented. "Dick," he went on sententiously and slangily, "was dead onto his job." After that he helped her into the saddle, and they rode blissfully homeward.

Near the ranch they met Dick, who pulled up and eyed them anxiously at first, and then with a broad smile.

"Say, Trix," he queried slyly, "who does Rex belong to?"

Keith came to the rescue promptly, just as a brave knight should. "You," he retorted. "But I tell you right now, he won't very long. You're going to do the decent thing and give him to Trixie —for a wedding present."

Dick looked as though Trix was welcome to anything he possessed.

CHAPTER XIV.

Sir Redmond Gets His Answer.

"Before long, dear, we shall get on the great ship, and ride across the large, large ocean, and be at home. You will be delighted to see Peggy, and Rupert, and the dogs, won't you, dear?" Miss Hayes, her cheeks actually getting some color into them at the thought of going home, buttered a fluffy biscuit for her idol.

Dorman took two bites while he considered. "Rupert'll want my little wheels, for my feet, what Mr. Cam'ron gave me—but he can't have 'em, dough. I 'spect he'll be mad. I wonder what'll Peggy say 'bout my two puppies. I've got to take my two puppies wis me. Will dey get sick riding on de water, auntie? Say, will dey?"

"I—I think not, dear," ventured his auntie cautiously. His auntie was a conscientious woman, and she knew very little about puppies.

"Be'trice will help me take care of dem, if dey're sick," he remarked comfortably. Then something

in his divinity's face startled his assurance. "You's going wis us, isn't you, Be'trice? I want you to help take care of my two puppies. Martha can't, 'cause she slaps dere ears. Is you going wis us, Be'trice?"

This, at the dinner table, was, to say the least, embarrassing—especially on this especial evening, when Beatrice was trying to muster courage to give Sir Redmond the only answer it was possible to give him now. It was an open secret that, in case she had accepted him, the home-going of Miss Hayes would be delayed a bit, when they would all go together. Beatrice had overheard her mother and Miss Hayes discussing this possibility only the day before. She undertook the impossible, and attempted to head Dorman off.

"Perhaps you'll see a whale, honey. The puppies never saw a whale, I'm sure. What do you suppose they'd think?"

"Is you going?"

"You'd have to hold them up high, you know, so they could see, and show them just where to look, and——"

"Is you going, Be'trice?"

Beatrice sent a quick, despairing glance around

the table. Four pairs of eyes were fixed upon her with varying degrees of interest and anxiety. The fifth pair—Dick's—were trying to hide their unrighteous glee by glaring down at the chicken wing on his plate. Beatrice felt a strong impulse to throw something at him. She gulped and faced the inevitable. It must come some time, she thought, and it might as well be now—though it did seem a pity to spoil a good dinner for every one but Dick, who was eating his with relish.

"No, honey"—her voice was clear and had the note of finality—"I'm not going—ever."

Sir Redmond's teeth went together with a click, and he picked up the pepper shaker mechanically and peppered his salad until it was perfectly black, and Beatrice wondered how he ever expected to eat it. Mrs. Lansell dropped her fork on the floor, and had to have a clean one brought. Miss Hayes sent a frightened glance at her brother. Dick sat and ate fried chicken.

"Why, Be'trice? I wants you to—and de puppies'll need you—and auntie, and——" Dorman gathered himself for the last, crushing argument—"and Uncle Redmon' wants you awf'lly!"

Beatrice took a sip of ice water, for she needed it.

"Why, Be'trice? Gran-mama'll let you go, I guess. Can't she go, gran'mama?"

It was Mrs. Lansell's turn to test the exquisite torture of that prickly chill along the spine. Like Beatrice, she dodged.

"Little boys," she announced weakly, "should not speak until they're spoken to."

Dick came near strangling on a shred of chicken.

"Can't she go, gran'mama? Say, can't she? Tell Be'trice to go home wis us, gran'mama!"

"Beatrice"—Mrs. Lansell swallowed—"is not a little child any longer, Dorman. She is a woman and can do as she likes. I"—she was speaking to the whole group—"I can only advise her."

Dorman gave a squeal of triumph. "See? You can go, Be'trice! Gran'mama says you can go. You will go, won't you, Be'trice? Say yes!"

"No!" said Beatrice, with desperate emphasis. "I won't."

"I want—Be'trice—to go-o!" Dorman slid down upon his shoulder blades, gave a squeal which was not triumph, but temper, and kicked the table till every dish on it danced.

"Dorman sit up!" commanded his auntie. "Dor-

man, stop, this instant! I'm ashamed of you; where is my good little man? Redmond."

Sir Redmond seemed glad of the chance to do something besides sit quietly in his place and look calm. He got up deliberately, and in two minutes, or less, Dorman was in the woodshed with him, making sounds that frightened his puppies dreadfully and put the coyotes to shame.

Beatrice left the table hurriedly to escape the angry eyes of her mother. The sounds in the woodshed had died to a subdued sniffling, and she retreated to the front porch, hoping to escape observation. There she nearly ran against Sir Redmond, who was staring off into the dusk to where the moon was peering redly over a black pinnacle of the Bear Paws.

She would have slipped back into the house, but he did not give her the chance. He turned and faced her steadily, as he had more than once faced the Boers, when he knew that before him was nothing but defeat.

"So you're not going to England—ever?"

Pride had squeezed every shade of emotion from his voice."

"No." Beatrice gripped her fingers together tightly.

"Are you sure you won't be sorry—afterward?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Beatrice had never done anything she hated more.

Sir Redmond, looking into her eyes, wondered why those much-vaunted sharpshooters, the Boers, had blundered and passed him by.

"I don't suppose it matters much now—but will you tell me why? I believed you would decide differently." He was holding his voice down to a dead level, and it was not easy.

"Because——" Beatrice faced the moon, which threw a soft glow upon her face, and into her wonderful, deep eyes a golden light. "Oh, I'm sorry, Sir Redmond! But you see, I didn't know. I—I just learned to-day what it means to—to love. I—I am going to stay here. A new—company—is about to be formed, Sir Redmond. The Maltese Cross and the—Triangle Bar—are going to cast their lot together." The golden glow deepened and darkened, and blended with the red blood which flushed cheek and brow and throat.

It took Sir Redmond a full minute to comprehend. When he did, he breathed deep, shut his

lips upon words that would have frightened her, and went down the steps into the gloom.

Beatrice watched him stride away into the dusky silence, and her heart ached with sympathy for him. Then she looked beyond, to where the lights of the Cross ranch twinkled joyously, far down the coulée, and the sweet egotism of happiness enfolded her, shutting him out. After that she forgot him utterly. She looked up at the moon, sailing off to meet the stars, smiled good-fellowship and then went in to face her mother.

ROWDY OF THE "CROSS L."

ROWDY OF THE "CROSS L"

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ROWDY OF THE "CROSS L."

CHAPTER I.

Lost in a Blizzard.

"Rowdy" Vaughan—he had been christened Rowland by his mother, and rechristened Rowdy by his cowboy friends, who are prone to treat with much irreverence the names bestowed by mothers—was not happy. He stood in the stirrups and shook off the thick layer of snow which clung, damp and close-packed, to his coat. The dull yellow folds were full of it; his gray hat, pulled low over his purple ears, was heaped with it. He reached up a gloved hand and scraped away as much as he could, wrapped the long-skirted, "sour-dough" coat around his numbed legs, then settled into the saddle with a shiver of distaste at the plight he was in, and wished himself back at the Horseshoe Bar.

Dixie, standing knee-deep in a drift, shook himself much after the manner of his master; perhaps

he, also, wished himself back at the Horseshoe Bar. He turned his head to look back, blinking at the snow which beat insistently in his eyes; he could not hold them open long enough to see anything, however, so he twitched his ears pettishly and gave over the attempt.

"It's up to you, old boy," Rowdy told him resignedly. "I'm plumb lost; I never was in this damn country before, anyhow—and I sure wish I wasn't here now. If you've any idea where we're at, I'm dead willing to have you pilot the layout. Never mind Chub; locating his feed when it's stuck under his nose is his limit."

Chub lifted an ear dispiritedly when his name was spoken; but, as was usually the case, he heard no good of himself, and dropped his head again. No one took heed of him; no one ever did. His part was to carry Vaughan's bed, and to follow unquestionably where Vaughan and Dixie might lead. He was cold and tired and hungry, but his faith in his master was strong; the responsibility of finding shelter before the dark came down rested not with him.

Vaughan pressed his chilled knees against Dixie's ribs, but the hand upon the reins was carefully

non-committal; so that Dixie, having no suggestion of his master's wish, ventured to indulge his own. He turned tail squarely to the storm and went straight ahead. Vaughan put his hands deep into his pockets, snuggled farther down into the sheepskin collar of his coat, and rode passive, enduring.

They brought up against a wire fence, and Vaughan, rousing from his apathy, tried to peer through the white, shifting wall of the storm. "You're a swell guide—not," he remarked to the horse. "Now you, you hike down this fence till you locate a gate or a corner, or any darned thing; and I don't give a cuss if the snow does get in your eyes. It's your own fault."

Dixie, sneezing the snow from his nostrils, turned obediently; Chub, his feet dragging wearily in the snow, trailed patiently behind. Half an hour of this, and it seemed as if it would go on forever.

Through the swirl Vaughan could see the posts standing forlornly in the snow, with sixteen feet of blizzard between; at no time could he distinguish more than two or three at once, and there were long minutes when the wall stood, blank and shifting, just beyond the first post.

Then Dixie lifted his head and gazed questioningly before him, his ears pointed forward—sentient, strained—and whinnied shrill challenge. He hurried his steps, dragging Chub out of the beginnings of a dream. Vaughan straightened and took his hands from his pockets.

Out beyond the dim, wavering outline of the farthest post came answer to the challenge. A mysterious, vague shape grew impalpably upon the strained vision; a horse sneezed, then nickered eagerly. Vaughan drew up and waited.

"Hello!" he called cheerfully. "Pleasant day, this. Out for your health?"

The shape hesitated, as though taken aback by the greeting, and there was no answer. Vaughan, puzzled, rode closer.

"Say, don't talk so fast!" he yelled. "I can't follow yuh."

"Who—who is it?" The voice sounded perturbed; and it was, moreover, the voice of a woman.

Vaughan pulled up short and swore into his collar. Women are not, as a rule, to be met out on the blank prairie in a blizzard. His voice, when he spoke again, was not ironical, as it had been; it was placating.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I thought it was a man. I'm looking for the Cross L; you don't happen to know where it is, do yuh?"

"No—I don't," she declared dismally. "I don't know where any place is. I'm teaching school in this neighborhood—or in some other. I was going to spend Sunday with a friend, but this storm came up, and I'm—lost."

"Same here," said Rowdy pleasantly, as though being lost was a matter for congratulation.

"Oh! I was in hopes——"

"So was I, so we're even there. We'll have to pool our chances, I guess. Any gate down that way?—or haven't you followed the fence?"

"I followed it for miles and miles—it seemed. It must be some big field of the Cross L; but they have so very many big fields!"

"And you couldn't give a rough guess at how far it is to the Cross L?"—insinuatingly.

He could vaguely see her shake of head. "Ordinarily it should be about six miles beyond Rodway's, where I board. But I haven't the haziest idea of where Rodway's place is, you see; so that won't help you much. I'm all at sea in this snow." Her voice was rueful.

"Well, if you came up the fence, there's no use going back that way; and there's sure nothing made by going away from it—that's the way I came. Why not go on the way you're headed?"

"We might as well, I suppose," she assented; and Rowdy turned and rode by her side, grateful for the plurality of the pronoun which tacitly included him in her wanderings, and meditating many things. For one, he wondered if she were as nice a girl as her voice sounded. He could not see much of her face, because it was muffled in a white silk scarf. Only her eyes showed, and they were dark and bright.

When he awoke to the fact that the wind, grown colder, beat upon her cruelly, he dropped behind a pace and took the windy side, that he might shield her with his body. But if she observed the action she gave no sign; her face was turned from him and the wind, and she rode without speaking. After long plodding, the line of posts turned unexpectedly a right angle, and Vaughan took a long, relieved breath.

"We'll have the wind on our backs now," he remarked. "I guess we may as well keep on and see where this fence goes to."

His tone was too elaborately cheerful to be very cheering. He was wondering if the girl was dressed warmly. It had been so warm and sunny before the blizzard struck, but now the wind searched out the thin places in one's clothing and ran lead in one's bones, where should be simply marrow. He fancied that her voice, when she spoke, gave evidence of actual suffering—and the heart of Rowdy Vaughan was ever soft toward a woman.

"If you're cold," he began, "I'll open up my bed and get out a blanket." He held Dixie in tentatively.

"Oh, don't trouble to do that," she protested; but there was that in her voice which hardened his impulse into fixed resolution.

"I ought to have thought of it before," he lamented, and swung down stiffly into the snow.

Her eyes followed his movement with a very evident interest while he unbuckled the pack Chub had carried since sunrise and drew out a blanket.

"Stand in your stirrup," he commanded briskly, "and I'll wrap you up. It's a Navajo, and the wind will have a time trying to find a thin spot."

"You're thoughtful." She snuggled into it thankfully. "I was cold."

Vaughan tucked it around her with more care than haste. He was pretty uncomfortable himself, and for that reason he was the more anxious that the girl should be warm. It came to him that she was a cute little schoolma'am, all right; he was glad she belonged close around the Cross L. He also wished he knew her name—and so he set about finding it out, with much guile.

"How's that?" he wanted to know, when he had made sure that her feet—such tiny feet—were well covered. He thought it lucky that she did not ride astride, after the manner of the latter-day young woman, because then he could not have covered her so completely. "Hold on! That windy side's going to make trouble." He unbuckled the strap he wore to hold his own coat snug about him, and put it around the girl's slim waist, feeling idiotically happy and guilty the while. "It don't come within a mile of you," he complained; "but it'll help some."

Sheltered in the thick folds of the Navajo, she laughed, and the sound of it sent the blood galloping through Rowdy Vaughan's body so that he was almost warm. He went and scraped the snow out of his saddle, and swung up, feeling that, after

all, there are worse things in the world than being lost and hungry in a blizzard, with a sweet-voiced, bright-eyed little schoolma'am who can laugh like that.

"I don't want to have you think I may be a bold, bad robber-man," he said, when they got going again. "My name's Rowdy Vaughan—for which I beg your pardon. Mother named me Rowland, never knowing I'd get out here and have her nice, pretty name mutilated that way. I won't say that my behavior never suggested the change, though. I'm from the Horseshoe Bar, over the line, and if I have my way, I'll be a Cross L man before another day." Then he waited expectantly.

"For fear you may think I'm a—a robber-woman," she answered him solemnly—he felt sure her eyes twinkled, if only he could have seen them—"I'm Jessie Conroy. And if you're from over the line, maybe you know my brother Harry. He was over there a year or two."

Rowdy hunched his shoulders—presumably at the wind. Harry Conroy's sister, was she? And he swore. "I may have met him," he parried, in a tone you'd never notice as being painstakingly careless. "I think I did, come to think of it."

Miss Conroy seemed displeased, and presently the cause was forthcoming. "If you'd ever met him," she said, "you'd hardly forget him." (Rowdy mentally agreed profanely.) "He's the best rider in the whole country—and the handsomest. He—he's splendid! And he's the only brother I've got. It's a pity you never got acquainted with him."

"Yes," lied Rowdy, and thought a good deal in a very short time. Harry Conroy's sister! Well, she wasn't to blame for that, of course; nor for thinking her brother a white man. "I remember I did see him ride once," he observed. "He was a whirlwind, all right—and he sure was handsome, too."

Miss Conroy turned her face toward him and smiled her pleasure, and Rowdy hovered between heaven and—another place. He was glad she smiled, and he was afraid of what that subject might discover for his straightforward tongue in the way of pitfalls. It would not be nice to let her know what he really thought of her brother.

"This looks to me like a lane," he said diplomatically. "We must be getting somewhere; don't you recognize any landmarks?"

Miss Conroy leaned forward and peered through

the clouds of snow dust. Already the night was creeping down upon the land, stealthily turning the blank white of the blizzard into as blank a gray—which was as near darkness as it could get, because of the snow which fell and fell, and yet seemed never to find an abiding-place, but danced and swirled giddily in the wind as the cold froze it dry. There would be no more damp, clinging masses that night; it was sifting down like flour from a giant sieve; and of the supply there seemed no end.

"I don't know of any lanes around here," she began dubiously, "unless it's——"

Vaughan looked sharply at her muffled figure and wondered why she broke off so suddenly. She was staring hard at the few, faint traces of landmarks; and, bundled in the red-and-yellow Navajo blanket, with her bright, dark eyes, she might easily have passed for a slim young squaw.

Out ahead, a dog began barking vaguely, and Rowdy turned eagerly to the sound. Dixie, scenting human habitation, stepped out more briskly through the snow, and even Chub lifted an ear briefly to show he heard.

"It may not be any one you know," Vaughan remarked, and his voice showed his longing; "but

it'll be shelter and a warm fire—and supper. Can you appreciate such blessings, Miss Conroy? I can. I've been in the saddle since sunrise; and I was so sure I'd strike the Cross L by dinner-time that I didn't bring a bite to eat. It was a sheep-camp where I stopped, and the grub didn't look good to me, anyway—I've called myself bad names all the afternoon for being more dainty than sensible. But it's all right now, I guess."

CHAPTER II.

Miss Conroy Refuses Shelter.

The storm lifted suddenly, as storms have a way of doing, and a low, squat ranch-house stood dimly revealed against the bleak expanse of wind-tortured prairie. Rowdy gave an exultant little whoop and made for the gate, leaned and swung it open and rode through, dragging Chub after him by main strength, as usual. When he turned to close the gate after Miss Conroy he found her standing still in the lane.

"Come on in," he called, with a trace of impatience born of his weariness and hunger.

"Thank you, no." Miss Conroy's voice was as crisply cold as the wind which fluttered the Navajo blanket around her face. "I much prefer the blizzard."

For a moment Rowdy found nothing to say; he just stared. Miss Conroy shifted uneasily in the saddle.

"This is old Bill Brown's place," she explained reluctantly. "He—I'd rather freeze than go in!"

"Well, I guess that won't be hard to do," he retorted curtly, "if you stay out much longer."

The dog was growing hysterical over their presence, and Bill Brown himself came out to see what it was all about. He could see two dim figures at the gate.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Why don't yuh come on in? What yuh standing there chewing the rag for?"

Vaughan hesitated, his eyes upon Miss Conroy.

"Go in," she commanded imperiously, quite as if he were a refractory pupil. "You're tired out, and hungry. I'm neither. Besides, I know where I am now. I can find my way without any trouble. Go in, I tell you!"

But Rowdy stayed where he was, with the gate creaking to and fro between them. Dixie circled till his back was to the wind. "I hope you don't think you're going to mill around out here alone," Rowdy said tartly.

"I can manage very well. I'm not lost now, I tell you. Rodway's is only three miles from here, and I know the direction."

Bill Brown waded out to them, wondering what weighty discussion was keeping them there in the cold. Vaughan he passed by with the cursory glance of a disinterested stranger, and went on to where Miss Conroy waited stubbornly in the lane.

"Oh, it's you!" he said grimly. "Well, come in and thaw out; I hope yuh didn't think yuh wouldn't be welcome—yuh knew better. You got lost, I reckon. Come on——"

Miss Conroy struck Badger sharply across the flank and disappeared into the night. "When I ask shelter of you," she flung back, "you'll know it."

Rowdy started after, and met Bill Brown squarely in the gate. Bill eyed him sharply. "Say, young fellow, how'd you come by that packhorse?" he demanded, as Chub brushed past him.

"None of your damn' business," snapped Rowdy, and drove the spurs into Dixie's ribs. But Chub was a handicap at any time; now, when he was tired, there was no getting anything like speed out of him; he clung to his shuffling trot, which was really no better than a walk. After five minutes spent alternately in spurring Dixie and yanking at Chub's lead-rope, Rowdy grew frightened and took to shouting. While they were in the lane Miss

Conroy must perforce ride straight ahead, but the lane would not last always. As though with malicious intent, the snow swooped down again and the world became an unreal, nightmare world, wherein was nothing save shifting, blinding snow-flour and wind and bitter, numbing cold.

Rowdy stood in his stirrups, cupped his chilled fingers around his numbed lips, and sent a long-drawn "Who-ee!" shrilling weirdly into the night.

It seemed to him, after long listening, that from the right came faint reply, and he turned and rode recklessly, swearing at Chub for his slowness. He called again, and the answer, though faint, was unmistakable. He settled heavily into the saddle—too weak, from sheer relief, to call again. He had not known till then just how frightened he had been, and he was somewhat disconcerted at the discovery. In a minute the reaction passed and he shouted a loud hello.

"Hello?" came the voice of Miss Conroy, tantalizingly calm, and as superior as the greeting of Central. "Were you looking for me, Mr. Vaughan?"

She was close to him—so close that she had not needed to raise her voice perceptibly. Rowdy rode

up alongside, remembering uncomfortably his prolonged shouting.

"I sure was," he admitted. And then: "You rode off with my blanket on." He was very proud of his matter-of-fact tone.

"Oh!" Miss Conroy was almost deceived, and a bit disappointed. "I'll give it to you now, and you can go back—if you know the way."

"No hurry," said Rowdy politely. "I'll go on and see if you can find a place that looks good to you. You seem pretty particular."

Miss Conroy may have blushed, in the shelter of the blanket. "I suppose it did look strange to you," she confessed, but defiantly. "Bill Brown is an enemy to—Harry. He—because he lost a horse or two out of a field, one time, he—he actually accused Harry of taking them! He lied, of course, and nobody believed him; nobody could believe a thing like that about Harry. It was perfectly absurd. But he did his best to hurt Harry's name, and I would rather freeze than ask shelter of him. Wouldn't you—in my place, I mean?"

"I always stand up for my friends," evaded Rowdy. "And if I had a brother——"

"Of course you'd be loyal," approved Miss Con-

roy warmly. "But I didn't want you to come on; it isn't your quarrel. And I know the way now. You needn't have come any farther——"

"You forgot the blanket," Rowdy reminded wickedly. "I think a lot of that Navajo."

"You insisted upon my taking it," she retorted, and took refuge in silence.

For a long hour they plodded blindly. Rowdy beat his hands often about his body to start the blood, and meditated yearnigly upon hot coffee and the things he liked best to eat. Also, a good long pull at a flask wouldn't be bad, either, he thought. And he hoped this little schoolma'am knew where she was going—truth to tell, he doubted it.

After a while, it seemed that Miss Conroy doubted it also. She took to leaning forward and straining her eyes to see through the gray wall before.

"There should be a gate here," she said dubiously, at last.

"It seems to me," Rowdy ventured mildly, "if there were a gate, it would have some kind of a fence hitched to it; wouldn't it?"

Miss Conroy was in no mood for facetiousness.

and refused to answer his question. "I surely can't have made a mistake," she observed uneasily.

"It would be a wonder if you didn't, such a night as this," he consoled. "I wouldn't bank on traveling straight myself, even if I knew the country —which I don't. And I've been in more blizzards than I'm years old."

"Rodway's place can't be far away," she said, brightening. "It may be farther to the east; shall we try that way—if you know which is east?"

"Sure, we'll try. It's all we can do. My packhorse is about all in, from the way he hangs back; if we don't strike something pretty soon I'll have to turn him loose."

"Oh, don't do that," she begged. "It would be too cruel. We're sure to reach Rodway's very soon."

More plodding through drifts high and drifts low; more leaning from saddles to search anxiously for trace of something besides snow and wind and biting cold. Then, far to the right, a yellow eye glowed briefly when the storm paused to take breath. Miss Conroy gave a glad little cry and turned Badger sharply.

"Did you see? It was the light from a window. We were going the wrong way. I'm sure that is Rodway's."

Rowdy thanked the Lord and followed her. They came up against a fence, found a gate, and passed through. While they hurried toward it, the light winked welcome; as they drew near, some one stirred the fire and sent sparks and rose-hued smoke rushing up into the smother of snow. Rowdy watched them wistfully, and wondered if there would be supper, and strong, hot coffee. He lifted Miss Conroy out of the saddle, carried her two long strides, and deposited her upon the door-step; rapped imperatively, and when a voice replied, lifted the latch and pushed her in before him.

For a minute they stood blinking, just within the door. The change from numbing cold and darkness to the light of the overheated room was stupefying.

Then Miss Conroy went over and held her little, gloved hands to the heat of the stove, but she did not take the chair which some one pushed toward her. She stood, the blanket shrouding her face and her slim young figure, and looked about her curiously. It was not Rodway's house, after all. She

thought she knew what place it was—the shack where Rodway's hay-balers bached.

From the first, Rowdy did not like the look of things—though for himself it did not matter; he was used to such scenes. It was the presence of the girl which made him uncomfortable. He unbuttoned his coat that the warmth might reach his chilled body, and frowned.

Four men sat around a small, dirty table; evidently the arrivals had interrupted an exciting game of seven-up. A glance told Rowdy, even if his nose had not, that the four round, ribbed bottles had not been nearly emptied without effect.

"Have one on the house," the man nearest him cried, and shoved a bottle toward him.

Involuntarily Rowdy reached for it. Now that he was inside, he realized all at once how weary he was, and cold and hungry. Each abused muscle and nerve seemed to have a distinct grievance against him. His fingers closed around the bottle before he remembered and dropped it. He looked up, hoping Miss Conroy had not observed the action; met her wide, questioning eyes, and the blood flew guiltily to his cheeks.

"Thanks, boys—not any for me," he said, and apologized to Miss Conroy with his eyes.

The man rose and confronted him unsteadily. "Dat's a hell off a way! You too proud for drink weeth us? You drink, now! By Gar, I make you drink!"

Rowdy's eyelids drooped, which was a bad sign for those who knew him. "You're forgetting there's a lady present," he reminded warningly.

The man turned a brief, contemptuous glance toward the stove. "You got the damn' queer way to talk. I don't call no squaw no lady. You drink queeck, now!"

"Aw, shut up, Frenchy," the man at his elbow abjured him. "He don't have to drink if he don't want to."

"You keep the face close," the other retorted majestically; and cursed loud and long and incoherently.

Rowdy drew back his arm, with a fist that meant trouble for somebody; but there were others before him who pinned the importunate host to the table, where he squirmed unavailingly.

Rowdy buttoned up his coat the while he eyed the group disgustedly. "I guess we'll drift," he

remarked. "You don't look good to me, and that's no dream."

"Aw, stay and warm up," the fourth man expostulated. "Yuh don't need t' mind Le Febre; he's drunk.'

But Rowdy opened the door decisively, and Miss Conroy, her cheeks like two storm-buffeted poppies, followed him out with dignity—albeit trailing a yard of red-and-yellow Navajo blanket behind her. Rowdy lifted her into the saddle, tucked her feet carefully under the blanket, and said never a word.

"Mr. Vaughan," she began hesitatingly, "this is too bad; you need not have left. I—I wasn't afraid."

"I know you weren't," conceded Rowdy. "But it was a hard formation—for a woman. Are there any more places on this flat marked Unavailable?"

Miss Conroy replied misanthropically that if there were they would be sure to find them.

They took up their weary wanderings again, while the yellow eye of the window winked after them. They missed Rodway's by a scant hundred yards, and didn't know it, because the side of the house next them had no lighted windows. They traveled in a wide, half circle, and thought that

they were leaving a straight trail behind them. More than once Rowdy was urged by his aching arm to drop the lead-rope and leave Chub to shift by himself, but habit was strong and his heart was soft. Then he felt an odd twitching at the lead-rope, as if Chub were minded to rebel against their leadership. Rowdy yanked him into remembrance of his duty, and wondered. Bill Brown's question came insistently to mind; he wondered the more.

Two minutes and the lead-rope was sawing against the small of his back again. Rowdy turned Dixie's head, and spoke for the first time in an hour.

"My packhorse seems to have an idea about where he wants to go," he said. "I guess we might as well follow him as anybody; he ain't often taken with a rush of brains to the head. And we can't be any worse lost than we are now, can we?"

Miss Conroy said no dispiritedly, and they swung about and followed Chub's leadership apathetically. It took Chub just five minutes to demonstrate that he knew what he was about. When he stopped, it was with his nose against a corral gate; not content with that, he whinnied, and a new, exultant note was in the sound. A deep-voiced dog bayed

loudly, and a shrill yelp cut in and clamored for recognition.

Miss Conroy gasped. "It's Lion and Skeesicks. We're at Rodway's, Mr. Vaughan."

Rowdy, for the second time, thanked the Lord. But when he was stripping the pack off Chub's back, ten minutes later, he was thinking many things he would not have cared to say aloud. It might be all right, but it sure was strange, he told himself, that Chub belonged here at Rodway's when Harry Conroy claimed that he was an Oregon horse. Rowdy had thought his account against Harry Conroy long enough, but it looked now as though another item must be added to the list. He went in and ate his supper thoughtfully, and when he got into bed he did not fall asleep within two minutes, as he might be expected to do. His last conscious thought was not of stolen horses, however. It was: "And she's Harry Conroy's sister! Now, what do you think of that? But all the same, she's sure a nice little schoolma'am."

CHAPTER III.

Rowdy Hires a New Boss.

Next morning, after breakfast, Mr. Rodway followed Vaughan out to the stable, and repeated Bill Brown's question.

"I'd like to know where yuh got this horse," he began, with an apologetic sort of determination in his tone. "He happens to belong to me. He was run off with a bunch three years ago, and this is the first trace anybody has ever got of 'em. I see the brand's been worked. It was a Roman four—that's my brand; now it looks like a map of Texas; but I'd swear to the horse—raised him from a colt."

Rowdy had expected something of the sort, and he knew quite well what he was going to do; he had settled that the night before, with the memory of Miss Conroy's eyes fresh in his mind.

"I got him in a deal across the line," he said. "I was told he came from east Oregon. But last night, when he piloted us straight to your corral

gate, I guessed he'd been here before. He's yours, all right, if you say so."

"Uh course he ain't worth such a pile uh money," apologized Rodway, "but the kids thought a heap of him. I'd rather locate some of the horses that was with him—or the man yuh got him of. They was some mighty good horses run out uh this country then, but they was all out on the range, so we didn't miss 'em in time to do any good. Do yuh know who took 'em across the line?"

"No," said Rowdy deliberately. "The man I got Chub from went north, and I heard he got killed. I don't know of any other in the deal."

Rodway grunted, and Vaughan began vigorously brushing Dixie's roughened coat. "If you don't mind," he said, after a minute, "I'd like to borrow Chub to pack my bed over to the Cross L. I can bring him back again."

"Why, sure!" assented Rodway eagerly. "I hate to take him from yuh, but the kids——"

"Oh, that's all right," interrupted Rowdy cheerfully. "It's all in the game, and I should 'a' looked up his pedigree, for I knew—— Anyway, it was worth the price of him to have him along last

night. We'd have milled around till daylight, I guess, only for him."

"That's what," agreed Rodway. "Jessie's horse is one she brought from home lately, and he ain't located yet; I dunno as he'd 'a' piloted her home. Billy—that's what the kids named him—was born and raised here, yuh see. I'll bet he's glad to get back—and the kids'll be plumb wild."

Rowdy did not answer; there seemed nothing in particular to say, and he was wondering if he would see Miss Conroy before he left. She had not eaten breakfast with the others; from their manner, he judged that no one expected her to. He was not well informed upon the subject of schoolma'ams, but he had a hazy impression that late rising was a distinguishing characteristic—and he did not know how late. He saddled leisurely, and packed his bed for the last time upon Chub. The red-and-yellow Navajo blanket he folded tenderly, with an unconscious smile for the service it had done, and laid it in its accustomed place in the bed. Then, having no plausible excuse for going back to the house, he mounted and rode away into the brilliant white world, watching wistfully the house from the tail of his eye.

She might have got up in time to see him off, he thought discontentedly; but he supposed one cowpuncher more or less made little difference to her. Anyway, he didn't know as he had any license to moon around her. She probably had a fellow; she might even be engaged, for all he knew. And—she was Harry Conroy's sister; and from his experience with the breed, good looks didn't count for anything. Harry was good-looking, and he was a snake, if ever there was one. He had never expected to lie for him—but he had done it, all right—and because Harry's sister happened to have nice eyes and a pretty little foot!——

He had half a mind to go back and tell Rodway all he knew about those horses; it was only a matter of time, anyway, till Harry Conroy overshot the mark and got what was coming to him. He sure didn't owe Harry anything, that he had need to shield him like he had done. Still, Rodway would wonder why he hadn't told it at first; and that little girl believed in Harry, and said he was "splendid!" Humph! He wondered if she really meant that. If she did——

He squared his back to the house—and the memory of Miss Conroy's eyes—and plodded across the

field to the gate. Now the sun was shining, and there was no possibility of getting lost. The way to the Cross L lay straight and plain before him.

Rowdy rode leisurely up over the crest of a ridge beyond which lay the home ranch of the Cross L. Whether it was henceforth to be his home he had yet to discover—though there was reason for hoping that it would be. Even so venturesome a man as Rowdy Vaughan would scarce ride a long hundred miles through unpeopled prairie, in the tricky month of March, without some reason for expecting a welcome at the end of his journey. In this case, a previous acquaintance with "Wooden Shoes" Mielke, foreman of the Cross L, was Rowdy's trump-card. Wooden Shoes, whenever chance had brought them together in the last two or three years, was ever urging Rowdy to come over and unroll his soogans in the Cross L bed-tent, and promising the best string in the outfit to ride—besides other things alluring to a cow-puncher. So that, when his relations with the Horseshoe Bar became strained, Rowdy remembered his friend of the Cross L and the promises, and had drifted south.

Just now he hoped that Wooden Shoes would be home to greet him, and his eyes searched wishfully

the huddle of low-eaved cabins and the assortment of sheds and corrals for the bulky form of the foreman. But no one seemed to be about—except a big-bodied, bandy-legged individual, who appeared to be playfully chasing a big, bright bay stallion inside the large enclosure where stood the cabins.

Rowdy watched them impersonally; a glance proved that the man was not Wooden Shoes, and so he was not particularly interested in him or his doings. It did occur to him, however, that if the fellow wanted to catch that brute, he ought to have sense enough to get a horse. No one but a plumb idiot would mill around in that snow afoot. He jogged down the slope at a shuffling trot, grinning tolerantly at the pantomime below.

He of the bandy-legs stopped, evidently out of breath; the stallion stopped also, snorting defiance. Rowdy heard him plainly, even at that distance. The horse arched his neck and watched the man warily, ready to be off at the first symptom of hostilities—and Rowdy observed that a short rope hung from his halter, swaying as he moved.

Bandy-legs seemed to have an idea; he turned and scuttled to the nearest cabin, returning with what seemed a basin of oats, for he shook it enti-

cingly and edged cautiously toward the horse. Rowdy could imagine him coaxing, with hypocritically endearing names, such as "Good old boy!" and "Steady now, Billy"—or whatever the horse's name might be. Rowdy chuckled to himself, and hoped the horse saw through the subterfuge.

Perhaps the horse chuckled also; at any rate, he stood quite still, equally prepared to bound away on the instant or to don the mask of docility. Bandy-legs drew nearer and nearer, shaking the basin briskly, like an old woman sifting meal. The horse waited, his nostrils quivering hungrily at the smell of the oats, and with an occasional low nicker.

Bandy-legs went on tiptoes—or as nearly as he could in the snow—the basin at arm's length before. The dainty, flaring nostrils sniffed tentatively, dipped into the basin, and snuffed the oats about luxuriously—till he felt a stealthy hand seize the dangling rope. At the touch he snorted protest, and was off and away, upsetting Bandy-legs and the basin ignominiously into a high-piled drift.

Bandy-legs sat up, scraped the snow out of his collar and his ears, and swore. It was then that Rowdy appeared like an angel of deliverance.

"Want that horse caught?" he yelled cheerfully.

Bandy-legs lifted up his voice and bellowed things I should not like to repeat verbatim. But Rowdy gathered that the man emphatically did want that so-and-so-and-then-some horse caught, and that it couldn't be done a blessed minute too soon. Whereat Rowdy smiled anew, with his face discreetly turned away from Bandy-legs, and took down his rope and widened the loop. Also, he turned Chub loose.

The stallion evidently sensed what new danger threatened his stolen freedom, and circled the yard with high, springy strides. Rowdy circled after, saw his chance, swirled the loop twice over his head, and hazarded a long throw.

Rowdy knew it for pure good luck that it landed right, but to this day Bandy-legs looks upon him as a Wonder with a rope—and Bandy-legs would insist upon the capital.

"Where shall I take him?" Rowdy asked, coming up with his captive, and with nothing but his eyes to show how he was laughing inwardly.

Bandy-legs crawled from the drift, still scraping snow from inside his collar, and gave many directions about going through a certain gate into such-and-such a corral; from there into a stable; and by

seeming devious ways into a minutely described stall.

"All right," said Rowdy, cutting short the last needless details. "I guess I can find the trail;" and started off, leading the stallion. Bandy-legs followed, and Chub, observing the departure of Dixie, ambled faithfully in the rear.

"Much obliged," conceded Bandy-legs, when the stallion was safely housed and tied securely. "Where yuh headed for, young man?"

"Right here," Rowdy told him calmly, loosening Dixie's cinch. "I'm the long-lost top hand that the Cross L's been watching the sky-line for, lo! these many moons, a-yearning for the privilege of handing me forty plunks about twice as fast as I've got 'em coming. Where's the boss?"

"Er—I'm him," confessed Bandy-legs meekly, and circled the two dubiously. "I guess you've heard uh Eagle Creek Smith—I'm him. The Cross L belongs to me."

Rowdy let out an explosive, and showed a row of nice teeth. "Well, I ain't hard to please," he added. "I won't kick on that, I guess. I like your looks tolerable well, and I'm willing to take yuh on for a boss. If yuh do your part, I bet we'll get

along fine." His tone was banteringly patronizing. "Anyway, I'll try yuh for a spell. You can put my name down as Rowdy Vaughan, lately canned from the Horseshoe Bar."

"What for?" ventured Bandy-legs—rather, Eagle Creek—still circling Rowdy dubiously.

"What for was I canned?" repeated Rowdy easily. "Being a modest youth, I hate t' tell yuh. But the old man's son and me, we disagreed, and one of his eyes swelled some; so did mine, a little." He stood head and shoulders above Eagle Creek, and he smiled down upon him engagingly. Eagle Creek capitulated before the smile.

"Well, I ain't got any sons—that I know of," he grinned. "So I guess yuh can consider yourself a Cross L man till further notice."

"Why, sure!" The teeth gleamed again briefly. "That's what I've been telling you right along. Where's old Wooden Shoes? He's responsible for me being here."

"Gone to Chinook. He'll be back in a day or two." Eagle Creek shifted his feet awkwardly. "Say"—he glanced uneasily behind him—"yuh don't want t' let it get around that yuh sort of—hired me—see?"

"Of course not," Rowdy assured him. "I was only joshing. If you don't want me, just tell me to hit the sod."

"You stay right where you're at!" commanded Eagle Creek with returned confidence in himself and his authority. Of a truth, this self-assured, straight-limbed young man had rather dazed him. "Take your bed and war-bag up to the bunk-house and make yourself t' home till the boys get back, and—say, where'd yuh git that pack-horse?"

The laugh went out of Rowdy's tawny eyes. The question hit a spot that was becoming sore. "I borrowed him this morning from Mr. Rodway," he said evenly. "I'm to take him back to-day. I stopped there last night."

"Oh!" Eagle Creek coughed apologetically, and said no word, while Rowdy led Chub back to the cabin which he had pointed out as the bunk-house; he stood by while Rowdy loosened the pack and dragged it inside.

"I guess you can get located here," he said. "I ain't workin' more'n three or four men just now, but there's quite a few uh the boys stopping here; the Cross L's a regular hang-out for cow-punchers. You're a little early for the season, but I'll see that

yuh have something t' do—just t' keep yuh out uh devilment."

Rowdy's brows unbent; it would seem that Eagle Creek was capable of "joshing" also. "It's up t' you, old-timer," he retorted. "I'm strong and willing, and don't shy at anything but pitchforks."

Eagle Creek grinned. "This ain't no blamed cow-hospital," he gave as a parting shot. "All the hay that's shoveled on this ranch needn't hurt nobody's feelings." With that he shut the door, and left Rowdy to acquaint himself with his new home.

CHAPTER IV.

Pink as "Chappyrone."

Rowdy was sprawled ungracefully upon somebody's bunk—he neither knew nor cared whose—and he was snoring unmelodiously, and not dreaming a thing; for when a cow-puncher has nothing in particular to do, he sleeps to atone for the weary hours when he must be very wide-awake. An avalanche descended upon his unwarned middle, and checked the rhythmic ebb and flow of sound. He squawked and came to life clawing viciously.

"I'd like t' know where the devil yuh come from," a voice remarked plaintively in a soft treble.

Rowdy opened his eyes with a snap. "Pink! by all that's good and bad! Get up off my diaphragm, you little fiend."

Pink absent-mindedly kneaded Rowdy's stomach with his knuckles, and immediately found himself in a far corner. He came back, dimpling mischievously. He looked much more an angel than a fiend, for all his Angora chaps and flame-colored scarf.

"Your bed and war-bag's on my bunk; you're on Smoky's; and Dixie's makin' himself to home in the corral. By all them signs and tokens, I give a reckless guess you're here t' stay a while. That right?" He prodded again at Rowdy's ribs.

"It sure is, Pink. And if I'd known you was holding out here, I'd 'a' come sooner, maybe. You sure look good to me, you darned little cuss!" Rowdy sat up and took a lightning inventory of the four or five other fellows lounging about. He must have slept pretty sound, he thought, not to hear them come in.

Pink read the look, and bethought him of the necessary introductions. "This is my side-kicker over the line that you've heard about till you're plumb weary, boys," he announced musically. "His name is Rowdy Vaughan—bronco-peeler, crap fiend, and all-round bad man. He ain't a safe companion, and yuh want t' sleep with your six-guns cuddled under your right ear, and never, on no account, show him your backs. He's a real wolf, he is, and the only reason I live t' tell the tale is because he respects m' size. Boys, I'm afraid for yuh—but I wish yuh well."

"Pink, you need killing, and I'm tempted to live

up to my rep," grinned Rowdy indulgently. "Read me the pedigree of your friends."

"Oh, they ain't no worse—when yuh git used to 'em. That long-legged jasper with the far-away look in his eyes is the Silent One—if he takes a notion t' you, he'll maybe tell yuh the name his mother calls him. He may have seen better days; but here's hoping he won't see no worse! He once was a tenderfoot; but he's convalescing."

The Silent One nodded carelessly, but with a quick, measuring glance that Rowdy liked.

"This unshaved savage is Smoky. He's harmless, if yuh don't mention socialism in his presence; and if yuh do, he'll down-with-the-trust-and-long-live-the-sons-uh-toil, all hours uh the night, and keep folks awake. Then him and the fellow that started him off 'll likely get chapped good and plenty. Over there's Jim Ellis and Bob Nevin; they've both turned a cow or two, and I've seen worse specimens running around loose—plenty of 'em. That man hidin' behind the grin—you can see him if yuh look close—is Sunny Sam. Yuh needn't take no notice of him, unless you're a mind to. He won't care—he's dead gentle.

"Say," he broke off, "how'd you happen t' stray

onto this range, anyhow? Yuh used t' belong t' the Horseshoe Bar so solid the assessor always put yuh down on the personal-property list."

"They won't pay taxes on me no more, son." Rowdy's eyes dwelt fondly upon Pink's cupid-bow mouth and dimples. He had never dreamed of finding Pink here; though, when he came to think of it, there was no reason why he shouln't.

Pink was not like any one else. He was slight and girlish to look at. But you mustn't trust appearances; for Pink was all muscle strung on steel wire, according to the belief of those who tried to handle him. He had little white hands, and feet that looked quite comfortable in a number four boot, and his hair was a tawny gold and curled in distracting, damp rings on his forehead. His eyes were blue and long-lashed and beautiful, and they looked at the world with baby innocence—whereas a more sophisticated little devil never jangled spurs at his heels. He was everything but insipid, and men liked him—unless he chose to dislike them, when they thought of him with grating teeth. To find him bullying the Cross L boys brought a warmth to Rowdy's heart.

Pink made a cigarette, and then offered Rowdy

his tobacco-sack, and asked questions about the Cypress Hills country. How was this girl?—and was that one married yet?—and did the other still grieve for him? As a matter of fact, he had yet to see the girl who could quicken his pulse a single beat, and for that reason it sometimes pleased him to affect susceptibility beyond that of other men.

It was after dinner when he and Rowdy went chumming down to the stables, gossiping like a couple of old women over a back fence.

"I see you've got Conroy's Chub yet," Pink observed carelessly.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake let up on that cayuse!" Rowdy cried petulantly. "I wish I'd never got sight uh the little buzzard-head; I've had him crammed down my throat the last day or two till it's getting plumb monotonous. Pink, that cayuse never saw Oregon. He was raised right on this flat, and he belongs to old Rodway. I've got to lead him back there and turn him over to-day."

Pink took three puffs at his cigarette, and lifted his long lashes to Rowdy's gloom-filled face. "Stole?" he asked briefly.

"Stole," Rowdy repeated disgustedly. "So was the whole blame' bunch, as near as I can make out."

"We might 'a' knowed it. We might 'a' guessed Harry Conroy wouldn't have a straight title to anything if he could make it crooked. I bet he never finished paying back that money yuh lent him—out uh the kindness uh your heart. Did he?" Pink leaned against the corral fence and kicked meditatively at a snow-covered rock.

"He did not, m' son. Chub's all I ever got out uh the deal—and I haven't even got him. I borrowed him from Rodway to pack my bed over—borrowed the blame' little runty cayuse that cost me sixty-four hard-earned dollars; that's what Harry borrowed of me. And every blame' gazabo on the flat wanted to know what I was doing with him!"

"I can tell yuh where t' find Conroy, Rowdy. He's working for an outfit down on the river. I'd sure fix him for this! Yuh got plenty of evidence; you can send him up like a charm. It was different when he cut your latigo strap in that rough-riding contest; yuh couldn't prove it on him. But this—why, man, it's a cinch!"

"I haven't lost Harry Conroy, so I ain't looking for him just now," growled Rowdy. "So long as he keeps out uh reach, I won't ask no more of him.

And, Pink, I wish you'd keep this quiet—about him having Chub. I told Rodway I couldn't put him next to the fellow that brought that bunch across the line. I told him the fellow went north and got killed. He did go north—fifty miles or so; and he'd ought to been killed, if he wasn't. Let it go that way, Pink."

Pink looked like a cherub-faced child when he has been told there's no Santa Claus. "Sure, if yuh say so," he stammered dubiously. He eyed Rowdy reproachfully, and then looked away to the horizon. He kicked the rock out of place, and then poked it painstakingly back with his toe—and from the look of him, he did not know there was a rock there at all.

"How'd yuh happen to run across Rodway?" he asked guilelessly.

"I stopped there last night. I got to milling around in that storm, and ran across the schoolma'am that boards at Rodway's. She was plumb lost, too, so we dubbed around together for a while, and finally got inside Rodway's field. Then Chub come alive and piloted us to the house. This morning Rodway claimed him—says the brand has been worked from a Roman four. Oh, it's all straight

goods," he added hastily. "Old Eagle Creek here knew him, too."

But Pink was not thinking of Chub. He hunched his chap-belt higher and spat viciously into the snow. "I knowed it," he declared, with melancholy triumph. "It's school-ma'amitis that's gave yuh softening uh the vitals, and not no Christian charity play. How comes it you're took that way, all unbeknown t' your friends? Yuh never used t' bother about no female girls. It's a cinch you're wise that she's Harry's sister; and I admit she's a swell looker. But so's he; and I should think, Rowdy, you'd had about enough uh that brand uh snake."

"There's nothing so snaky about her that I could see," defended Rowdy. He did not particularly relish having his own mental argument against Miss Conroy thrown back at him from another. "She seemed to be all right; and if you'd seen how plucky she was in that blizzard——"

"Well, I never heard anybody stand up and call Harry white-livered, when yuh come t' that," Pink cut in tartly. "Anyway, you're a blame fool. If she was a little white-winged angel, yuh wouldn't stand no kind uh show; and I tell yuh why. She's got a little tin god that she says prayers to regular

That's Harry. And wouldn't he be the fine brother-in-law! He could borrow all your wages off'n yuh, and when yuh went t' make a pretty ride, he'd up and cut your latigo, and give yuh a fall. And he could work stolen horses off onto yuh—and yuh wouldn't give a damn, 'cause Jessie wears a number two shoe——"

"You must have done some rimrock riding after her yourself!" jeered Rowdy.

"And has got shiny brown eyes, just like Harry's——"

"They're not!" laughed Rowdy, half-angrily. "If you say that again, Pink, I'll stick your head in a snow-bank. Her eyes are all right. They sure look good to me."

"You've sure got 'em," mourned Pink. "Yuh need t' be close-herded by your friends, and that's no dream. You wait till toward evening before yuh take that horse back. I'm going along t' chappy-rone yuh, Rowdy. Yuh ain't safe running loose any more."

Rowdy cursed him companionably and told him to go along, if he wanted to, and to look out he didn't throw up his own hands; and Pink grumbled and swore and did go along. But when they got

there, Miss Conroy greeted him like a very good friend; which sent Rowdy sulky, and kept him so all the evening. It seemed to him that Pink was playing a double game, and when they started home he told him so.

But Pink turned in his saddle and smiled so that his dimples showed plainly in the moonlight. "Chappyrones that set in a corner and look wise are the rankest kind uh fakes," he explained. "When she was talking to me, she was letting you alone—see?"

Rowdy accepted the explanation silently, and stored it away in his memory. After that, by riding craftily, and by threats, and by much vituperation, he managed to reach Rodway's unchapperoned at least three times out of five—which was doing remarkably well, when one considers Pink.

CHAPTER V.

At Home at Cross L.

In two days Rowdy was quite at home with the Cross L. In a month he found himself transplanted from the smoke-laden air of the bunk-house, and set off from the world in a line camp, with nothing to do but patrol the boggy banks of Milk River, where it was still unfenced and unclaimed by small farmers. The only mitigation of his exile, so far as he could see, lay in the fact that he had Pink and the Silent One for companions.

It developed that when he would speak to the Silent One, he must say Jim, or wait long for a reply. Also, the Silent One was not always silent, and he was quick to observe the weak points in those around him, and keen at repartee. When it pleased him so to do, he could handle the English language in a way that was perfectly amazing—and not always intelligible to the unschooled. At such times Pink frankly made no attempt to understand him; Rowdy, having been hustled through grammar-

school and two-thirds through high school before he ran away from a brand new stepmother, rather enjoyed the outbreaks and Pink's consequent disgust.

Not one of them loved particularly the line camp, and Rowdy least of all, since it put an extra ten miles between Miss Conroy and himself. Rowdy had got to that point where his mind dwelt much upon matters domestic, and he made many secret calculations on the cost of housekeeping for two. More than that, he put himself upon a rigid allowance for pocket-money—an allowance barely sufficient to keep him in tobacco and papers. All this without consulting Miss Conroy's wishes—which only goes to show that Rowdy Vaughan was a born optimist.

The Silent One complained that he could not keep supplied with reading-matter, and Pink bewailed the monotony of inaction. For, beyond watching the river to keep the cattle from miring in the mud lately released from frost grip, there was nothing to do.

According to the calendar, spring was well upon them, and the prairies would soon be flaunting new dresses of green. The calendar, however, had neglected to record the rainless heat of the summer

gone before, or the searing winds that burned the grass brown as it grew, or the winter which forgot its part and permitted prairie-dogs to chip-chip-chip above ground in January, when they should be sleeping decently in their cellar homes.

Apart from the brief storm which Rowdy had brought with him, there had been no snow worth considering. Always the chill winds shaved the barren land from the north, or veered unexpectedly, and blew dry warmth from the southwest; but never the snow for which the land yearned. Wind, and bright sunlight, and more wind, and hypocritical, drifting clouds, and more sun; lean cattle walking, walking, up-hill and down coulée, nose to the dry ground, snipping the stray tufts where should be a woolly carpet of sweet, ripened grasses, eating wild-rose bushes level with the sod, and wishing there was only an abundance even of them; drifting uneasily from hilltop to farther hilltop, hunger-driven and gaunt, where should be sleek content. When they sought to continue their quest beyond the river, and the weaker bogged at its muddy edge, Rowdy and Pink and the Silent One would ride out, and with their ropes drag them back ignominiously to solid ground and the very doubtful joy of living.

May Day found the grass-land brown and lifeless, with a chill wind blowing over it. The cattle wandered as before—except that knock-kneed little calves trailed beside their lean mothers and clamored for full stomachs.

The Cross L cattle bore the brunt of the range famine, because Eagle Creek Smith was a stockman of the old school. His cattle must live on the open range, because they always had done so. Other men bought or leased large tracts of grass-land, and fenced them for just such an emergency, but not he. It is true that he had two or three large fields, as Miss Conroy had told Rowdy, but it was his boast that all the hay he raised was eaten by his saddle-horses, and that all the fields he owned were used solely for horse pastures. The open range was the place for cattle—and no Cross L critter ever fed inside a wire fence.

Through the dry summer before, when other men read the ominous signs and hurriedly leased pasture-land and cut down their herds to what the fields would feed, Eagle Creek went calmly on as he had done always. He shipped what beef was fit—and that, of a truth, was not much!—and settled down for the winter, trusting to winter snows and

spring rains to refill the long-dry lakes and water-holes, and coat the levels anew with grass.

But the winter snows had failed to appear, and with the spring came no rain. "April showers" became a hideously ironical joke at nature's expense. Always the wind blew, and sometimes great flocks of clouds would drift superciliously up from the far sky-line, play with men's hopes, and sail disdainfully on to some more favored land.

It is all very well for a man to cling stubbornly to precedent, but if he clings long enough, there comes a time when to cling becomes akin to crime. Eagle Creek Smith still stubbornly held that range-cattle should be kept to the range. He waited until May was fast merging to June, watching, from sheer habit, for the spring transformation of brown prairies into green. When it did not come, and only the coulée sides and bottoms showed green among the brown, he accepted ruefully the unusual conditions which nature had thrust upon him, and started "Wooden Shoes" out with the wagons on the horse round-up, which is a preliminary to the round-up proper, as every one knows.

CHAPTER VI.

A Shot From the Dark.

"I call that a bad job well done," Pink remarked, after a long silence, as he gave over trying to catch a fish in the muddy Milk River.

"What?" Rowdy, still prone to day-dreams of matters domestic, came back reluctantly to reality, and inspected his bait.

"Oh, come alive! I mean the horse round-up. How we're going to keep that bunch uh skeletons under us all summer is a guessing contest for fair. Wooden Shoes has got t' give me about forty, instead of a dozen, if he wants me t' hit 'er up on circle the way I'm used to. I bet their back-bones'll wear clean up through our saddles."

"Oh, I guess not," said Rowdy calmly. "They ain't so thin—and they'll pick up flesh. There's some mighty good ones in the bunch, too. I hope Wooden Shoes don't forget to give me the first pick. There's one I got my eye on—that blue roan.

Anyway, I guess you can wiggle along with less than forty."

Pink shook his head thoughtfully and sighed. Pink loved good mounts, and the outlook did not please him. The round-up had camped, for the last time, on the river within easy riding distance of Camas. The next day's drive would bring them to the home ranch, where Eagle Creek was fuming over the lateness of the season, the condition of the range, and the June rains, which had thus far failed even to moisten decently the grass-roots.

"Let's ride over to Camas; all the other fellows have gone," Pink proposed listlessly, drawing in his line.

Rowdy as listlessly consented. Camas as a town was neither interesting nor important; but when one has spent three long weeks communing with nature in her sulkiest and most unamiable mood, even a town without a railroad to its name may serve to relieve the monotony of living.

The sun was piling gorgeous masses of purple and crimson clouds high about him, cuddling his fat cheeks against their soft folds till, a Midas, he turned them to gold at the touch. Those farther away gloomed jealously at the favoritism of their

lord, and huddled closer together—the purple for rage, perhaps; and the crimson for shame.

Pink's face was tinged daintily with the glow, and even Rowdy's lean, brown features were for the moment glorified. They rode knee to knee silently, thinking each his own thoughts the while they watched the sunset with eyes grown familiar with its barbaric splendor, but never indifferent.

Soon the west held none but the deeper tints, and the shadows climbed, with the stealthy tread of trailing Indians, from the valley, chasing the after-glow to the very hilltops, where it stood a moment at bay and then surrendered meekly to the dusk. A meadow-lark near-by cut the silence into haunting ripples of melody, stopped affrighted at their coming, and flew off into the dull glow of the west; his little body showed black against a crimson cloud. Out across the river a lone coyote yapped sharply, then trailed off into the weird plaint of his kind.

"Brother-in-law's in' town to-day; Bob Nevin saw him," Pink remarked, when the coyote ceased wailing and held his peace.

"Who?" Rowdy only half-heard.

"Bob Nevin," repeated Pink naively.

"Don't get funny. Who did Bob see?"

"Brother-in-law. Yours, not mine. Jessie's tin god. If he's there yet, I bid for an invite to the 'swatfest.' Or maybe"—a horrible possibility forced itself upon Pink—"maybe you'll kill the fattest maverick and fall on his neck——"

"The maverick's?" Rowdy's brows were rather pinched together, but his tone told nothing.

"Naw; Harry Conroy's. A fellow's liable to do most any fool thing when he's got schoolma'amitis."

"That so?"

Pink snorted. The possibility had grown to black certainty in his mind. He became suddenly furious.

"Lord! I hope some kind friend'll lead me out an' knock me in the head, if ever I get locoed over any darned girl!"

"Same here," agreed Rowdy, unmoved.

"Then your days are sure numbered in words uh one syllable, old-timer," snapped Pink.

Rowdy leaned and patted him caressingly upon the shoulder—a form of irony which Pink detested. "Don't get excited, sonny," he soothed. "Did you fetch your gun?"

"I sure did!" Pink drew a long breath of relief. "Yuh needn't think I'm going t' take chances on being no human colander. I've packed a gun for

Harry Conroy ever since that rough-riding contest uh yourn. Yuh mind the way I took him under the ear with a rock? He's been makin' war-talks behind m' back ever since. Did I bring m' gun? Well, I guess yes!" He dimpled distractingly.

"All the same, it'll suit me not to run up against him," said Rowdy quite frankly. He knew Pink would understand. Then he lifted his coat suggestively, to show the weapon concealed beneath, and smiled.

"Different here. Yuh did have sense enough t' be ready—and if yuh see him, and don't forget he's got a sister with a number two foot, damned if I don't fix yuh both a-plenty!" He settled his hat more firmly over his curls, and eyed Rowdy anxiously from under his lashes.

Rowdy caught the action and the look from the tail of his eye, and grinned at his horse's ears. Pink in warlike mood always made him think of a four-year-old child playing pirate—with the difference that Pink was always in deadly earnest and would fight like a fiend.

For more reasons than one he hoped they would not meet Harry Conroy. Jessie was still in ignorance of his real attitude toward her brother, and

Rowdy wanted nothing more than to keep her so. The trouble was that he was quite certain to forget everything but his grievances, if ever he came face to face with Harry. Also, Pink would always fight quicker for his friends than for himself, and he felt very tender toward Pink. So he hoped fervently that Harry Conroy had already ridden back whence he came, and there would be no unpleasantness.

Four or five Cross L horses stood meekly before the Come Again Saloon, so Rowdy and Pink added theirs to the gathering and went in. The Silent One looked up from his place at a round table in a far corner, and beckoned.

"We need another hand here," he said, when they went over to him. "These gentlemen are worried because they might be taken into high society some day, and they would be placed in a very embarrassing position through their ignorance of bridge-whist. I have very magnanimously consented to teach them the rudiments."

Bob Nevin looked up, and then lowered an eyelid cautiously. "He's a liar. He offered to learn us how to play it; we bet him the drinks he didn't savvy the game himself. Set down, Pink, and I'll have you for my pretty pardner."

The Silent One shuffled the cards thoughtfully. "To make it seem like bona-fide bridge," he began, "we should have everybody playing."

"Aw, the common, ordinary brand is good enough," protested Bob. "I ain't in on any trimmings."

The Silent One smiled ever so slightly. "We shoud have prizes—or favors. Is there a store in town where one could buy something suitable?"

"They got codfish up here; I smelt it," suggested Jim Ellis. Him the Silent One ignored.

"What do you say, boys, to a real, high society whist-party? I'll invite the crowd, and be the hostess. And I'll serve punch——"

"Come on, fellows, and have one with me," called a strange voice near the door.

"Meeting's adjourned," cried Jim Ellis, and got up to accept the invitation and range along the bar with the rest. He had not been particularly interested in bridge-whist, anyway.

The others remained seated, and the bartender called across to know what they would have. Pink cut the cards very carefully, and did not look up. Rowdy thrust both hands in his pockets and turned his square shoulder to the bar. He did not need to

look—he knew that voice, with its shoddy heartiness.

Men began to observe his attitude, and looked at one another. When one is asked to drink with another, he must comply or decline graciously, if he would not give a direct insult.

Harry Conroy took three long steps and laid a hand on Rowdy's shoulder—a hand which Rowdy shook off as though it burned. "Say, stranger, are you too high-toned t' drink with a common cow-puncher?" he demanded sharply.

Rowdy half-turned toward him. "No, sir. But I'll be mighty thirsty before I drink with you." His voice was even, but it cut.

The room stilled on the instant; it was as if every man of them had turned to lay figures. Harry Conroy had winced at sight of Rowdy's face—men saw that, and some of them wondered. Pink leaned back in his chair, every nerve tightened for the next move, and waited. It was Harry—handsome, sneering, a certain swaggering defiance in his pose—who first spoke.

"Oh, it's you, is it? I haven't saw yuh for some time. How's bronco-fighting? Gone up against any more contests?" He laughed mockingly—with

mouth and eyes maddeningly like Jessie's in teasing mood.

Rowdy could have killed him for the resemblance alone. His lids drooped sleepily over eyes that glittered. Harry saw the sign, read it for danger; but he laughed again.

"Yuh ought to have seen this bronco-peeler pull leather, boys," he jeered recklessly. "I like to 'a' died. He got piled up the slickest I ever saw; and there was some feeble-minded Canucks had money up on him, too. He won't drink with me, 'cause I got off with the purse. He's got a grouch—and I don't know as I blame him; he did get let down pretty hard, for a fact."

"Maybe he did pull leather—but he didn't cut none, like you did, you damn' skunk!" It was Pink—Pink, with big, long-lashed eyes purple with rage, and with a dead-white streak around his mouth, and a gun in his hand.

Harry wheeled toward him, and if a new light of fear crept into his eyes, his lips belied it in a sneer. "Two of a kind!" he laughed. "So that's the story yuh brought over here, is it? Hell of a lot uh good it'll do yuh!"

Something in Pink's face warned Rowdy.

Harry's face turned watchfully from one to the other. Evidently he considered Pink the more uncertain of the two; and he was quite justified in so thinking. Pink was only waiting for a cue before using his gun; and when Pink once began, there was no telling where or when he would leave off.

While Harry stood uncertain, Rowdy's fist suddenly spatted against his cheek with considerable force. He tumbled, a cursing heap, against the foot-rail of the bar, scrambled up like a cat—a particularly vicious cat—and came at Rowdy murderously. The Come Again would shortly have been filled with the pungent haze of burned powder, only that the bartender was a man of action. He hated brawls, and it did not matter to him how just might be the quarrel; he slapped the gaping barrels of a sawed-off shotgun across the bar—and from the look of it one might imagine many disagreeable things.

"Drop it! Cut it out!" he bellowed. "Yuh ain't going t' make no slaughter-pen out uh this joint, I tell yuh. Put up them guns or else take 'em outside. If you fellers are hell-bent on smokin' each

other up, they's all kinds uh room outdoors. Git! ¡Vamose! Hike!"

Conroy wheeled and walked, straight-backed and venomous, to the door. "Come on out, if yuh ain't scared," he sneered. "It's two agin' one—and then some, by the look uh things. But I'll take yuh singly or in bunches. I'm ready for the whole damn' Cross L bunch uh coyotes. Come on, you white-livered——!"

Rowdy rushed for him, with Pink and the Silent One at his heels. He had forgotten that Harry Conroy ever had a sister of any sort whatsoever. All he knew was that Harry had done him much wrong, of the sort which comes near to being unforgivable, and that he had sneered insults that no man may overlook. All he thought of was to get his hands on him.

Outside, the dusky stillness made all sounds seem out of place; the faint starlight made all objects black and unfamiliar. Rowdy stopped, just off the threshold, blinking at the darkness which held his enemy. It was strange that he did not find him at his elbow, he thought—and a suspicion came to him that Harry was lying in wait; it would be like him. He stepped out of the yellow glare from a window

and stood in more friendly shade. Behind him, on the door-step, stood the other two, blinking as he had done.

A form which he did not recognize rushed up out of the darkness and confronted the three belligerently. "You're a-disturbin' the peace," he yelled. "We don't stand for nothing like that in Camas. You're my prisoners—all uh yuh." The edict seemed to include even the bartender, peering over the shoulder of Bob Nevin, who struggled with several others for immediate passage through the doorway.

"I guess not, pardner," retorted Pink, facing him as defiantly as though the marshal were not twice his size.

The marshal lunged for him; but the Silent One, reaching a long arm from the door-step, rapped him smartly on the head with his gun. The marshal squawked and went down in a formless heap.

"Come on, boys," said the Silent One coolly. "I think we'd better go. Your friend seems to have vanished in thin air."

Rowdy, grumbling mightily over what looked unpleasantly like retreat, was pushed toward his horse and mounted under protest. Likewise Pink,

who was for staying and cleaning up the whole town. But the Silent One was firm, and there was that in his manner which compelled obedience.

Harry Conroy might have been an optical—and aural—illusion, for all the trace there was of him. But when the three rode out into the little street, a bullet pinged close to Rowdy's left ear, and the red bark of a revolver spat viciously from a black shadow beside the Come Again.

Rowdy and the two turned and rode back, shooting blindly at the place, but the shadow yawned silently before them and gave no sign. Then the Silent One, observing that the marshal was getting upon a pair of very unsteady legs, again assumed the leadership, and fairly forced Rowdy and Pink into the homeward trail.

CHAPTER VII.

Rowdy in a Tough Place.

Rowdy, with nice calculation, met Miss Conroy just as she had left the school-house, and noted with much satisfaction that she was riding alone. Miss Conroy, if she had been at all observant, must have seen the light of some fixed purpose shining in his eyes; for Rowdy was resolved to make her a partner in his dreams of matters domestic. And, of a truth, his easy assurance was the thinnest of cloaks to hide his inner agitation.

"The round-up just got in yesterday afternoon," he told her, as he swung into the trail beside her. "We're going to start out again to-morrow, so this is about the only chance I'll have to see you for a while."

"I knew the round-up must be in," said Miss Conroy calmly. "I heard that you were in Camas a night or two ago."

Inwardly, Rowdy dodged. "We camped close to

Camas," he conceded guardedly. "A lot of us fellows rode into town."

"Yes, so Harry told me," she said. "He came over to see me yesterday. He is going to leave—has already, in fact. He has had a fine position offered him by the Indian agent at Belknap. The agent used to be a friend of father's." She looked at Rowdy sidelong, and then went straight at what was in the minds of both.

"I'm sorry to hear, Mr. Vaughan, that you are on bad terms with Harry. What was the trouble?" She turned her head and smiled at him—but the smile did not bring his lips to answer; it was unpleasantly like the way Harry smiled when he had some deviltry in mind.

Rowdy scented trouble and parried. "Men can't always get along agreeably together."

"And you disagree with a man rather emphatically, I should judge. Harry said you knocked him down." Politeness ruled her voice, but cheeks and eyes were aflame.

"I did. And of course he told you how he took a shot at me from a dark corner, outside." Rowdy's eyes, it would seem, had kindled from the fire in hers.

"No, he didn't—but I—you struck him first."

"Hitting a man with your fist is one thing," said Rowdy with decision. "Shooting at him from ambush is another."

"Harry shouldn't have done that," she admitted with dignity. "But why wouldn't you take a drink with him? Not that I approve of drinking—I wish Harry wouldn't do such things—but he said it was an insult the way you refused."

"Jessie——"

"Miss Conroy, please."

"Jessie"—he repeated the name stubbornly—"I think we'd better drop that subject. You don't understand the case; and, anyway, I didn't come here to discuss Harry. Our trouble is long standing, and if I insulted him you ought to know I had a reason. I never came whining to you about him, and it don't speak well for him that he hot-footed over to you with his version. I suppose he'd heard about me—er—going to see you, and wanted to queer me. I hope you'll take my word for it, Jessie, that I've never harmed him; all the trouble he's made for himself, one way and another.

"But what I came over for to-day concerns just you and me. I wanted to tell you that—to ask you

if you'll marry me. I might put it more artistic, Jessie, but that's what I mean, and—I mean all the things I'd like to say and can't." He stopped and smiled at her, wistfully whimsical. "I've been three weeks getting my feelings into proper words, little girl, and coming over here I had a speech thought out that sure done justice to my subject. But all I can remember of it is just that—that I want you for always."

Miss Conroy looked away from him, but he could see a deeper tint of red in her cheek. It seemed a long time before she said anything. Then: "But you've forgotten about Harry. He's my brother, and he'd be—er—you wouldn't want him related—to you."

"Harry! Well, I pass him up. I've got a pretty long account against him; but I'll cross it off. It won't be hard to do—for you. I've thought of all that; and a man can forgive a whole lot in the brother of the woman he loves." He leaned toward her and added honestly: "I can't promise you I'll ever get to like him, Jessie; but I'll keep my hands off him, and I'll treat him civil; and when you consider all he's done, that's quite a large-sized contract."

Miss Conroy became much interested in the ears of her horse.

"The only thing to decide is whether you like me enough. If you do, we'll sure be happy. Never mind Harry."

"You're very generous," she flared, "telling me to never mind Harry. And Harry's my own brother, and the only near relative I've got. I know he's—impulsive, and quick-tempered, perhaps. But he needs me all the more. Do you think I'll turn against him, even for you?"

That "even" may have been a slip, but it heartened Rowdy immensely. "I don't ask you to," he told her gently. "I only want you to not turn against me."

"I do wish you two would be sensible, and stop quarreling." She glanced at him briefly.

"I'm willing to cut it out—I told you that. I can't answer for him, though." Rowdy sighed, wishing Harry Conroy in Australia, or some place equally remote.

Miss Conroy suddenly resolved to be strictly just; and when a young woman sets about being deliberately just, the Lord pity him whom she judges!

"Before I answer you, I must know just what all

this is about," she said firmly. "I want to hear both sides; I'm sure Harry wouldn't do anything mean. Do you think he would?"

Rowdy was dissentingly silent.

"Do you really, in your heart, believe that Harry would—knowingly—be guilty of anything mean?" Her eyes plainly told the answer she wanted to hear.

Rowdy looked into them, hesitated, and clung tenaciously to his convictions. "Yes, I do; and I know Harry pretty well, Jessie." His face showed how much he hated to say it.

"I'm afraid you are very prejudiced," she sighed. "But go on; tell me just what you have against Harry. I'm sure it can all be explained away, only I must hear what it is."

Rowdy regarded her, puzzled. How he was to comply he did not know. It would be simply brutal to tell her. He would feel like a hangman. And she believed so in Harry, she wouldn't listen; even if she did, he thought bitterly, she would hate him for destroying her faith. A woman's justice—ah, me!

"Don't you see you're putting me in a mighty hard position, girlie?" he protested. "You're a heap better off not to know. He's your brother. I wish

you'd take my word that I'll drop the whole thing right where it is. Harry's had all the best of it, so far; let it stand that way."

Her eyes met his coldly. "Are you afraid to let me judge between you? What did he do? Daren't you tell?"

Rowdy's lids drooped ominously. "If you call that a dare," he said grimly, "I'll tell you, fast enough. I was a friend to him when he needed one mighty bad. I helped him when he was dead broke and out uh work. I kept him going all winter —and to show his gratitude, he gave me the double-cross, in more ways than one. I won't go into details." He decided that he simply could not tell her bluntly that Harry had worked off stolen horses on him, and worse.

"Oh—you won't go into details!" Scorn filled eyes and voice. "Are they so trivial, then? You tell me what you did for Harry—playing Good Samaritan. Harry, let me tell you, has property of his own; I can't see why he should ever be in need of charity. You're like all the rest; you hint things against him—but I believe it's just jealousy. You can't come out honestly and tell me a single in-

stance where he has harmed you, or done anything worse than other high-spirited young men."

"It wouldn't do any good to tell you," he retorted. "You think he's just lacking wings to be an angel. I hope to God you'll always be able to think so! I'm sure I don't want to jar your faith."

"I must say your actions don't bear out your words. You've just been trying to turn me against him."

"I haven't. I've been trying to convince you that I want you, anyway, and Harry needn't come between us."

"In other words, you're willing to overlook my being Harry's sister. I appreciate your generosity, I'm sure." She did not look, however, as if she meant that.

"I didn't mean that."

"Then you won't overlook it? How very unfortunate! Because I can't help the relationship."

"Would you, if you could?' he asked rashly.

"Certainly not!"

"I'm afraid we're getting off the trail," he amended tactfully. "I asked you, a while back, if you'd marry me."

"And I said I must hear both sides of your trouble with Harry, before I could answer."

"What's the use? You'd take his part, anyway."

"Not if I found he was guilty of all you—insinuate. I should be perfectly just." She really believed that.

"Can't you tell me yes or no, anyway? Don't let him come between us."

"I can't help it. We'd never agree, or be happy. He'd keep on coming between us, whether we meant him to or not," she said dispiritedly.

"That's a cinch," Rowdy muttered, thinking of Harry's trouble-breeding talents.

"Then there's no more to be said. Until you and Harry settle your difficulties amicably, or I am convinced that he's in the wrong, we'll just be friends, Mr. Vaughan. Good afternoon." She rode into the Rodway yard, feeling very just and virtuous, no doubt. But she left Rowdy with some rather unpleasant thoughts, and with a sentiment toward her precious brother which was not far from manslaughter.

CHAPTER VIII.

Pink in a Threatening Mood.

Eagle Creek Smith had at last reached the point where he must face new conditions and change established customs. He could no longer ignore the barrenness of the range, or close his eyes to the grim fact that his cattle were facing starvation—and that in June, when they should be taking on flesh.

When he finally did confess to himself that things couldn't go on like that, others had been before him in leasing and buying land, until only the dry benches were left to him and his hungry herds.

But Eagle Creek was a man of resource. When the round-up pulled in and Wooden Shoes reported to him the general state of the cattle, and told of the water-holes newly fenced and of creek bottoms gobbled by men more farseeing than he, Eagle Creek took twenty-four hours to adjust himself to the situation and to meet the crisis before him. His own land, as compared to his twenty thousand cattle, was too pitifully inadequate for a second thought.

He must look elsewhere for the correct answer to his problem.

When Rowdy rode apathetically up to the stable, Pink came out of the bunk-house to meet him, big with news. "Oh, doctor! We're up against it a-plenty now," he greeted, with his dimples at their deepest.

"Huh!" grunted Rowdy crossly. "What's hurting you, Pink?"

"Forecasting the future," Pink retorted. "Eagle Creek has come alive, and has wised up sudden to the fact that this ain't going t' be any Noah's flood brand uh summer, and that his cattle look like the tailings of a wash-board factory. He's got busy—and we're sure going to. We're due t' hit the grit out uh here in the first beams uh rosy morn, and do a record stunt at gathering cattle."

"Well, we were going to, anyhow," Rowdy cut in.

"But that's only the prelude, old-timer. We've got t' take 'em across country to the Belknap reservation. Eagle Creek went t' town and telegraphed, and got the refusal of it for pasturage; he ain't so slow, oncet he gets started. But if you've ever rode over them dried-up benches, you savvy the merry

party we'll be when we git there. I've saw jack-rabbits packing their lunch along over there."

"Belknap"—Rowdy dropped his saddle spitefully to the ground—"is where our friend Conroy has just gone to fill a splendid position."

Pink thoughtfully blew the ashes from his cigarette. "Harry Conroy would fill one position fine. Some uh these days I'll offer it to him. I don't know anybody that'd look nicer in a coffin than that jasper—and if he's gone t' Belknap, that's likely the position he'll fill, all right."

Rowdy said nothing, but his very silence told Pink much.

"How'd yuh make out with Jessie?" Pink asked frankly, though he was not supposed to know where Rowdy had been.

Rowdy knew from experience that it was useless trying to keep anything from Pink that Pink wanted to know; besides, there was a certain comfort in telling his troubles to so stanch a friend. "Harry got his work in there, too," he said bitterly. "He beat me to her and queered me for good, by the looks."

"Huh!" said Pink. "I wouldn't waste much time worrying over her, if she's that easy turned."

"She's all right," defended Rowdy quickly. "I don't know as I blame her; she takes the stand any sister would take. She wants to know all about the trouble—hear both sides, she said, so she could judge which was to blame. I guess she's got her heart set on being peacemaker. I know one thing: she—likes me, all right."

"I don't see how he queered yuh any, then," puzzled Pink. "She sure couldn't take his part after you'd told her all he done."

Rowdy turned on him savagely. "You little fool, do you think I told her? Right there's the trouble. He told his story; and when she asked for mine, I couldn't say anything. She's his sister."

"You—didn't—tell!" Pink leaned against the stable and stared. "Rowdy Vaughan, there's times when even your friend can't disguise the fact that yuh act plumb batty. Yuh let Harry do yuh dirt that any other man'd 'a' killed him on bare suspicion uh doing; and yuh never told her when she asked yuh to! How yuh lent him money, and let him steal some right out uh your pocket——"

"I couldn't prove that," Rowdy objected.

"And yuh never told her about his cutting your latigo——"

"Oh, cut it out!" Rowdy glowered down at him. "I guess I don't need to be reminded of all those things. But are they the things a man can tell a girl about her brother? Pink, you're about as unfeeling a little devil as I ever run across. Maybe you'd have told her; but I couldn't. So it's all off."

He turned away and stared unseeingly at the rim of hills that hid the place where she lived. She seemed very far away from him just then—and very, very desirable. He thought then that he had never before realized just how much he cared.

"You can jest bet I'd 'a' told her!" gritted Pink, watching furtively Rowdy's averted face. "She ain't goin' t' be bowed down by no load of ignorance much longer, either. If she don't get Harry Conroy's pedigree straight out, without the varnish, it'll be because I ain't next to all his past."

But Rowdy, glooming among the débris of certain pet air-castles, neither heard nor wanted to hear Pink's wrathful mutterings. As a matter of fact, it was not till Pink clattered out of the yard on Mascot that he remembered where he was. Even then it did not occur to him to wonder where Pink was going.

CHAPTER IX.

Moving the Herd.

Four thousand weary cattle crawled up the long ridge which divides Chin Coulée from Quitter Creek. Pink, riding point, opposite the Silent One, twisted round in his saddle and looked back at the slow-moving river of horns and backs veiled in a gray dust-cloud. Down the line at intervals rode the others, humped listlessly in their saddles, their hat brims pulled low over tired eyes that smarted with dust and wind and burning heat.

Pink sighed, and wished lonesomely that it was Rowdy riding point with him, instead of the Silent One, who grew even more silent as the day dragged leadenly to mid-afternoon; Pink could endure anything better than being left to his thoughts and to the complaining herd for company.

He took off his hat, pushed back his curls—dripping wet they were and flattened unbecomingly in pasty, yellow rings on his forehead—and eyed with disfavor a line-backed, dry cow, with one horn

tipped rakishly toward her speckled nose; she blinked silently at wind and heat, and forged steadily ahead, up-hill and down coulée, always in the lead, always walking, walking, like an automaton. Her energy, in the face of all the dry, dreary days, rasped Pink's nerves unbearably. For nearly a week he had ridden left point, and always that line-backed cow with the down-crumpled horn walked and walked and walked, a length ahead of her most intrepid followers.

He leaned from his saddle, picked up a rock from the barren, yellow hillside, and threw it at the cow spitefully. The rock bounced off her lean rump; she blinked and broke into a shuffling trot, her dragging hoofs kicking up an extra amount of dust, which blew straight into Pink's face.

"Aw, cut it out!" he shouted petulantly. "You're sure the limit, without doing any stunts at sprinting up-hill. Ain't yuh got any nerves, yuh blamed old skate? Yuh act like it was milkin'-time, and yuh was headed straight for the bars and a bran mash. Can't yuh realize the kind uh deal you're up against? Here's cattle that's got you skinned for looks, old girl, and they know it's coming blamed tough; and you just bat your eyes and peg along

like yuh enjoyed it. Bawl, or something, can't yuh? Drop back a foot and act human!"

The Silent One looked across at him with a tired smile. "Let her go, Pink, and pray for more like her," he called amusedly. "There'll be enough of them dropping back presently."

Pink threw one leg over the horn and rode sidewise, made him a cigarette, and tried to forget the cow—or, at least, to forgive her for not acting as dog-tired as he felt.

They were on the very peak of the ridge now, and the hill sloped smoothly down before them to the bluff which bounded Quitter Creek. Far down, a tiny black speck in the coulée-bottom, they could see Wooden Shoes riding along the creek-bank, scouting for water. From the way he rode, and from the fact that camp was nowhere in sight, Pink guessed shrewdly that his quest was in vain. He shrugged his shoulders at what that meant, and gave his attention to the herd.

The marching line split at the brow of the bluff. The line-backed cow lowered her head a bit and went unfaltering down the parched, gravel-coated hill, followed by a few hundred of the freshest. Then the stream stopped flowing, and Pink and the Silent

One rode back up the bluff to where the bulk of the footsore herd, their senses dulled by hunger and weariness and choking thirst, sniffed at the gravel that promised agony to their bruised feet, and balked at the ordeal. Others straggled up, bunched against the rebels, and stood stolidly where they were.

Pink galloped on down the crawling line. "Forward, the Standard Oil Brigade!" he yelled whimsically as he went.

The cowboys heard—and understood. They left their places and went forward at a lope, and Pink rode back to the coulée edge, untying his slicker as he went. The Silent One was already off his horse and shouting hoarsely as he whacked with his slicker at the sulky mass. Pink rode in and did the same. It was not the first time this thing had happened, and from a diversion it was verging closely on the monotonous. Presently, even a rank tenderfoot must have caught the significance of Pink's military expression. The Standard Oil Brigade was at the front in force.

Cowboys, swinging five-gallon oil-cans, picked up from scattered sheep camps and carried many a weary mile for just such an emergency, were char-

ging the bunch intrepidly. Others made shift with flat sirup-cans with pebbles inside. A few, like Pink and the Silent One, flapped their slickers till their arms ached. Anything, everything that would make a din and startle the cattle out of their lethargy, was pressed into service.

But they might have been raised in a barnyard and fed cabbage leaves from back door-steps, for all the excitement they showed. Cattle that three months ago—or a month—would run, head and tail high in air, at sight of a man on foot, backed away from a rattling, banging cube of gleaming tin, turned and faced the thing dull-eyed and apathetic.

In time, however, they gave way doggedly before the onslaught. A few were forced shrinkingly down the hill; others followed gingerly, until the line lengthened and flowed, a sluggish, brown-red stream, into the coulée and across to Quitter Creek.

Here the leaders were browsing greedily along the banks. They had emptied the few holes that had still held a meager store of brackish water, and so the mutinous bulk of the herd snuffed at the trampled, muddy spots and bellowed their disappointment.

Wooden Shoes rode up and surveyed the half-

maddened animals gloomily. "Push 'em on, boys," he said. "They's nothings for 'em here. I've sent the wagons on to Red Willow; we'll try that next. Push 'em along all yuh can, while I go on ahead and see."

With tin-cans, slickers, and much vituperation, they forced the herd up the coulée side and strung them out again on trail. The line-backed cow walked and walked in the lead before Pink's querulous gaze, and the others plodded listlessly after. The gray dust-cloud formed anew over their slow-moving backs, and the cowboys humped over in their saddles and rode and rode, with the hot sun beating aslant in their dirt-grimed faces, and with the wind blowing and blowing.

If this had been the first herd to make that dreary trip, things would not have been quite so disheartening. But it was the third. Seven thousand lean kine had passed that way before them, eating the scant grass growth and drinking what water they could find among those barren, sun-baked coulées.

The Cross L boys, on this third trip, were become a jaded lot of hollow-eyed men, whose nerves were rasped raw with long hours and longer days in the saddle. Pink's cheeks no longer made his name ap-

propriate, and he was not the only one who grew fretful over small things. Rowdy had been heard, more than once lately, to anathematize viciously the prairie-dogs for standing on their tails and chip-chip-chipping at them as they went by. And though the Silent One did not swear, he carried rocks in his pockets, and threw them with venomous precision at every "dog" that showed his impertinent nose out of a burrow within range. For Pink, he vented his spleen on the line-backed cow.

So they walked and walked and walked.

The cattle balked at another hill, and all the tin-cans and slickers in the crowd could scarcely move them. The wind dropped with the sun, and the clouds glowed gorgeously above them, getting scant notice, except that they told eloquently of the coming night; and there were yet miles—long, rough, heartbreaking miles—to put behind them before they could hope for the things their tired bodies craved: supper and dreamless sleep.

When the last of the herd had sidled, under protest, down the long hill to the flat, dusk was pushing the horizon closer upon them, mile by mile. When they crawled sinuously out upon the welcome level, the hill loomed ghostly and black behind them.

A mile out, Wooden Shoes rode out of the gloom and met the point. He turned and rode beside Pink.

"Yuh'll have t' swing 'em north," he greeted. "Red Willow's dry as hell—all but in the Rockin' R field. No use askin' ole Mullen to let us in there; we'll just go. I sent the wagons through the fence, an' yuh'll find camp about a mile up from the mouth uh the big coulée. You swing 'em round the end uh this bench, an' hit that big coulée at the head. When you come t' the fence, tear it down. They's awful good grass in that field!"

"All right," said Pink cheerfully. It was in open defiance of range etiquette; but their need was desperate. The only thing about it Pink did not like was the long détour they must make. He called the news across to the Silent One, after Wooden Shoes had gone on down the line, and they swung the point gradually to the left.

Before that drive was over, Pink had vowed many times to leave the range forever and never to turn another cow—besides a good many other foolish things which would be forgotten, once he had a good sleep. And Rowdy, plodding half-way down the herd, had grown exceedingly pessimistic regarding Jessie Conroy, and decided that there was no

sense in thinking about her all the time, the way he had been doing. Also, he told himself savagely, that if Harry ever crossed his trail again, there would be something doing. This thing of letting a cur like that run roughshod over a man on account of a girl that didn't care was plumb idiotic. And beside him the cattle walked and walked and walked, a dim, moving mass in the quiet July night.

CHAPTER X.

Harry Conroy at Home.

It was late next morning when they got under way; for they had not reached camp until long after midnight, and Wooden Shoes was determined the cattle should have one good feed, and all the water they wanted, to requite them for the hard drive of the day before.

Pink rode out with Rowdy to the herd—a heavy-lidded, gloomy Rowdy he was, and not amiably inclined toward the small talk of the range. But Pink had slept five whole hours and was almost his normal self; which means that speech was not to be denied him.

"What yuh mourning over?" he bantered. "Mad 'cause the reservation's so close?"

"Sure," assented Rowdy, with deep sarcasm.

"That's what I thought. Studying up the nicest way uh giving brother-in-law the glad hand, ain't yuh?"

"He's no relation uh mine—and never will be,"

said Rowdy curtly. "And I'll thank you, Pink, to drop that subject for good and all."

"Down she goes," assented Pink, quite unperturbed. "But the cards ain't all turned yet, yuh want to remember, I wouldn't pass on no hand like you've got. If I wanted a girl right bad, Rowdy, I'd wait till I got refused before I'd quit."

"Seems to me you've changed your politics lately," Rowdy retorted. "A while back you was cussing the whole business; and now you're worse than an old maid aunt. Pink, you may not be wise to the fact, but you sure are an inconsistent little devil."

"Are yuh going t' hunt Harry up and——"

"I thought I told you to drop that."

"Did yuh? All right, then—only I hope yuh didn't leave your gun packed away in your bed," he insinuated.

"You can take a look to-night, if you want to."

Pink laughed in a particularly infectious way he had, and, before he quite knew it, Rowdy was laughing, also. After that the world did not look quite so forlorn as it had, nor the day's work so distasteful. So Pink, having accomplished his purpose, was content to turn the subject.

"There's old Liney"—he pointed her out to Rowdy—"fresh as a meadow-lark. I had a big grouch against her yesterday, just because she batted her eyes and kept putting one foot ahead uh the other. I could 'a' killed her. But she's all right, that old girl. The way she led out down that black coulée last night wasn't slow! Say, she's an ambitious old party. I wish you was riding point with me, Rowdy. The Silent One talks just about as much as that old cow. He sure loves to live up to his rep."

"Oh, go on to work," Rowdy admonished. "You make me think of a magpie." All the same, he looked after him with smiling lips, and eyes that forgot their gloom. He even whistled while he helped round up the scattered herd, ready for that last day's drive.

Every man in the outfit comforted himself with the thought that it was the last day's drive. After long weeks of trailing lean herds over barren, wind-brushed hills, the last day meant much to them. Even the Silent One sang something they had never heard before, about "If Only I Knew You Were True."

They crossed the Rocking R field, took down

four panels of fence, passed out, and carefully put them up again behind them. Before them stretched level plain for two miles; beyond that a high, rocky ridge that promised some trouble with the herd, and after that more plain and a coulée or two, and then, on a far slope—the reservation.

The cattle were rested and fed, and walked out briskly; the ridge neared perceptibly. Pink's shrill whistle carried far back down the line and mingled pleasantly with voices calling to one another across the herd. Not a man was humped listlessly in his saddle; instead, they rode with shoulders back and hats at divers jaunty angles to keep the sun from shining in eyes that faced the future cheerfully.

The herd steadily climbed the ridge, choosing the smoothest path and the easiest slope. Pink assured the line-backed cow that she was a peach, and told her to "go to it, old girl." The Silent One's pockets were quite empty of rocks, and the prairie-dogs chipped and flirted their funny little tails unassailed. And Rowdy, from wondering what had made Pink change his attitude so abruptly, began to plan industriously the next meeting with Jessie Conroy, and to build a new castle that was higher and airier than any he had ever before attempted—

and perhaps had a more flimsy foundation; for it rested precariously on Pink's idle remarks.

The point gained the top of the ridge, and Pink turned and swung his hat jubilantly at the others. The reservation was in sight, though it lay several miles distant. But in that clear air one could distinguish the line fence—if one had the eye of faith and knew just where to look. Presently he observed a familiar horseman climbing the ridge to meet them.

"Eagle Creek's coming," he shouted to the man behind. "Come alive, there, and don't let 'em roam all over the map. Git some style on yuh!"

Those who heard laughed; no one ever dreamed of being offended at what Pink said. Those who had not heard had the news passed on to them, in various forms. Wooden Shoes, who had been loitering in the rear gossiping with the men, rode on to meet Smith.

Eagle Creek urged his horse up the last steep place, right in the face of the leaders, which halted and tried to turn back. Pink, swearing in a whisper, began to force them forward.

"Let 'em alone," Eagle Creek bellowed harshly. "They ain't goin' no farther."

"W-what?" Pink stopped short and eyed him critically. Eagle Creek could not justly be called a teetotaler; but Pink had never known him to get worse than a bit wobbly in his legs; his mind had never fogged perceptibly. Still, something was wrong with him, that was certain. Pink glanced dubiously across at the Silent One and saw him shrug his shoulders expressively.

Eagle Creek rode up and stopped within ten feet of the line-backed cow; she seemed hurt at being held up in this manner, Pink thought.

"Yuh'll have t' turn this herd back," Eagle Creek announced bluntly.

"Where to?" Pink asked, too stunned to take in the meaning of it.

"T' hell, I guess. It's the only place I know of where everybody's welcome." Eagle Creek's tone was not pleasant.

"We just came from there," Pink said simply, thinking of the horrors of that drive.

"Where's Wooden Shoes?" snapped the old man; and the foreman's hat-crown appeared at that instant over the ridge.

"Well, we're up against it," Eagle Creek greeted. "That damn' agent—or the fellow he had workin'

for him—reported his renting us pasture. Made the report read about twice as many as we're puttin' on. He's got orders now t' turn out every hoof but what b'longs there."

"My Lord!" Wooden Shoes gasped at the catastrophe which faced the Cross L.

"That's Harry Conroy's work," Pink cut in sharply. "He'd hurt the Cross L if he could, t' spite me and Rowdy. He——"

"Don't matter—seein' it's done. Yuh might as well turn the herd loose right here, an' let 'em go t' the devil. I don't know what else t' do with 'em."

"Anything gone wrong?" It was Rowdy, who had left his place and ridden forward to see what was holding the herd back.

"Naw. We're fired off the reservation, is all. We got orders to take the herd to hell. Eagle Creek's leased it. Mr. Satan is going to keep house here in Montana; he says it's better for his trade," Pink informed him, in his girlish treble.

Eagle Creek turned on him fiercely, then thought better of it and grinned. "Them arrangements wouldn't make us any worse off'n what we are," he commented. "Turn 'em loose, boys."

"Man, if yuh turn 'em loose here, the first storm

that hits 'em, they'll die," Wooden Shoes interposed excitedly. "They ain't nothings for 'em. We had t' turn 'em into the Rockin' R field last night, t' git water an' feed. Red Willow's gone dry outside dat field. They ain't—nothings. They'll die!"

Eagle Creek looked at him dully. For the first time in his life he faced utter ruin. "Damn 'em, let 'em die, then!" he said.

"That's what they'll sure do," Wooden Shoes reiterated stubbornly. "If they don't git feed and water now, yuh needn't start no round-up next spring."

Pink's eyes went down over the close-huddled backs and the thicket of polished horns, and his eyelids stung. Would all of them die, he wondered! Four thousand! He hoped not. There must be some way out. Down the hill, he knew the cowboys were making cigarettes while they waited and wondered mightily what it was all about. If they only knew, he thought, there would be more than one rope ready for Harry Conroy.

"How about the Peck reservation? Couldn't you get them on there?" Rowdy ventured.

"Not a hoof!" growled Eagle Creek, with his chin sunk against his chest. "There's thirty thou-

sand Valley County cattle on there now." He looked down at the cattle, as Pink had done. "God! It's bad enough t' go broke," he groaned; "but t' think uh them poor brutes dyin' off in bunches, for want uh grass an' water! I've run that brand fer over thirty year."

CHAPTER XI.

Rowdy Promoted.

Rowdy rode closer. "If you don't mind paying duty," he began tentatively, "I can put you next to a range over the line, where I'll guarantee feed and water the year round for every hoof you own."

Eagle Creek lifted his head and looked at him. "Whereabouts?" he demanded skeptically.

"Up in the Red Deer country. Pink knows the place. There's range a-plenty, and creeks running through that never go dry; and the country isn't stocked and fenced to death, like this is."

"And would we be ordered off soon as we got there?"

"Sure not—if you paid duty, which would only be about double what you were going to pay for one year's pasture."

Eagle Creek breathed deeply, like a man who has narrowly escaped suffocation. "Young man, I b'lieve you're a square dealer, and that yuh savvy the cow business. I've thought it ever since yuh

started t' work." His keen old eyes twinkled at the memory of Rowdy's arrival, and Rowdy grinned. "I take yuh at your word, and yuh can consider yourself in charge uh this herd as it stands. Take it t' that cow heaven yuh tell about—and damn it, yuh won't be none the worse for it!"

"We'll pass that up," said Rowdy quietly. "I'll take the herd through, though; and I'd advise you to get the rest on the road as soon as they can be gathered. It's a three-hundred-mile drive."

"All right. From now on it's up to you," Eagle Creek told him briskly. "Take 'em back t' the Rockin' R field, and I'll send the wagons back t' you. Old Mullen'll likely make a roar—but that's most all gove'ment land he's got fenced, so I guess I c'n calm him down. Will yuh go near the ranch?"

"I think so," said Rowdy. "It will be the shortest way."

"Well, I'll give yuh some blank checks, an' you c'n load up with grub and anything else yuh need. I'll be over there by the time you are, and fix up that duty business. Wooden Shoes'll have t' get another outfit together, and get another bunch on the trail. One good thing—I got thirty days t' get off what

cattle is on there; and thirty days uh grass and water'll put 'em in good shape for the trip. Wish this bunch was as well fixed."

"That's what," Rowdy assented. "But I think they'll make it, all right."

"I'll likely want yuh to stay up there and keep cases on 'em. Any objections?"

"Sure not!" laughed Rowdy. "Only I'll want Pink and the Silent One to stay with me."

"Keep what men yuh want. Anything else?"

"I don't think of anything," said Rowdy. "Only I'd like to have a—talk—with Conroy."

Eagle Creek eyed him sharply. "Yuh won't be apt t' meet him. Old Bill Brown, up home, would like to see him, too. Bill's a perseverin' old cuss, and wants to see Conroy so bad he's got the sheriff out lookin' for him. It's about a bunch uh horses that was run off, three years ago. Yuh brought one of 'em back into the country last spring, yuh mind."

Rowdy and Pink looked at one another, but said nothing.

"Old Bill, he follered your back trail and found out some things he wanted t' know. Conroy got wind of it, though, and he left the agency kind-a suddint. No use yuh lookin' for him."

"Then we're ready to hit the grit, I guess." Rowdy glanced again at Pink, who nodded.

"Well, I ain't stoppin' yuh," Eagle Creek drawled laconically. "S'-long, and good luck t' yuh."

He waited while Pink and the Silent One swung the point back down the hill, with Rowdy helping them, quite unmoved by his sudden promotion. When the herd was fairly started on the backward march, Eagle Creek nodded satisfaction the while he pried off a corner of plug-tobacco.

"He's all right," he asserted emphatically. "That boy suits me, from the ground up. If he don't put that deal through in good shape, it'll be because it can't be did."

Wooden Shoes, with whom Rowdy had always been a prime favorite, agreed with Dutch heartiness. Then, leaving the herd to its new guardian, they rode swiftly to overtake and turn back the wagons.

"Three hundred miles! And part of it across a howling desert!" Rowdy drew his brows together. "It's a big thing for me, all right, Pink; but it's sure a big contract to take this herd through, if anybody should happen to ask yuh."

"Oh, buck up! You'll make good, all right—if only these creeks wasn't so bone dry!"

"Well, there's water enough in the Rocking R field for to-day; we'll throw 'em in there till to-morrow. And I've a notion I can find a better trail across to North Fork than the way we came. I'm going to strike out this afternoon and see, anyway, if Quitter Creek hasn't got water farther up. Once we get up north uh the home ranch, I can see my way clear."

"Go to it, boss," Pink cried heartily. "I don't see how I'm goin t' keep from sassing yuh, once in a while, though. That's what bothers me. What'll happen if I turn loose on yuh, some time?"

"You'll get fired, I expect," laughed Rowdy, and rode off to announce the news to the rest of the outfit, who were very unhappy in their mystification.

If their reception of the change of plans and foreman was a bit profane, and their manner toward him a bit familiar, Rowdy didn't mind. He knew that they did not grudge him his good luck, even while they hated the long drive. He also knew that they watched him furtively; for nothing—not even misfortune—is as sure a test of a man's character as success. They liked Rowdy, and they did not

believe this would spoil him; still, every man of them was secretly a bit anxious.

On the trail, he rode in his accustomed place, and, so far as appearances went, the party had no foreman. He went forward and helped Pink take down the fence that had been so carefully put up a few hours before, and he whistled while he put it in place again, just as if he had no responsibility in the world. Then the cattle were left to themselves, and the men rode down to their old campground, marked by empty tin-cans and a trodden place where had been the horse corral.

Rowdy swung down and faced the men gravely. Instinctively they stood at attention, waiting for what he had to say; they felt that the situation was so far out of the ordinary that a few remarks pertaining to their new relations would not be out of place.

He looked them over appraisingly, and met glances as grave as his own. Straight, capable fellows they were, every man of them.

"Boys," he began impressively, "you all know that from to-day on you're working under my orders. I never was boss of anything but the cayuse

I happened to have under me, and I'm going to extract all the honey there is in the situation. Maybe I'll never be boss again—but at present I'm it. I want you fellows to remember that important fact, and treat me with proper respect. From now on you can call me Mr. Vaughan; 'Rowdy' doesn't go, except on a legal holiday.

"Furthermore, I'm not going to get out at daylight and catch up my own horse; I'll let yuh take turns being flunky, and I'll expect yuh to saddle my horse every morning and noon, and bring him to the cook-tent—and hold my stirrup for me. Also, you are expected, at all times and places, to anticipate my wants and fall over yourselves waiting on me. "You're just common, ordinary, forty-dollar cow-punchers, and if I treat yuh white, it's because I pity yuh for not being up where I am. Remember, vassals, that I'm your superior, mentally, morally, socially——"

"Chap him!" yelled Pink, and made for him. "I'll stand for a lot, but don't yuh ever think I'm a vassal!"

"Mutiny is strictly prohibited!" he thundered. "Villains, beware! Gadzooks—er—let's have a swim before the wagons come!"

They laughed and made for the creek, feeling rather crestfallen and a bit puzzled.

"If I had an outfit like this to run, and a three-hundred-mile drive to make," Bob Nevin remarked to the Silent One, "blessed if I'd make a josh of it! I'd cultivate the corrugated brow and the stiff spine —me!"

"My friend," the Silent One responded, "don't be too hasty in your judgment. It's because the corrugated brow will come later that he laughs now. You'll presently find yourself accomplishing the impossible in obedience to the flicker of Rowdy Vaughan's eyelids. Man, did you never observe the set of his head, and the look of his eye? Rowdy Vaughan will get more out of this crowd than any man ever did; and if he fails, he'll fail with the band playing 'Hot Time.'"

"Maybe so," Bob admitted, not quite convinced; "but I wonder if he realizes what he's up against."

At which the Silent One only smiled queerly as he splashed into the water.

After dinner Rowdy caught up the blue roan, which was his favorite for a hard ride—he seemed to have forgotten his speech concerning "flunkies" —and rode away up the coulée which had brought

them into the field the night before. The boys watched him go, speculated a lot, and went to sleep as the best way of putting in the afternoon.

Pink, who knew quite well what was in Rowdy's mind, said nothing at all; it is possible that he was several degrees more jealous of the dignity of Rowdy's position than was Rowdy himself, who had no time to think of anything but the best way of getting the herd to Canada. He would like to have gone along, only that Rowdy did not ask him to. Pink assured himself that it was best for Rowdy not to start playing any favorites, and curled down in the bed-tent with the others and went to sleep.

It was late that night when Rowdy crept silently into his corner of the tent; but Pink was awake, and whispered to know if he found water. Rowdy's "Yes" was a mere breath, but it was enough.

At sunrise the herd trailed up the Rocking R coulée, and Pink and the Silent One pointed them north of the old trail.

CHAPTER XII

"You Can Tell Jessie."

In the days that followed Rowdy was much alone. There was water to hunt, far ahead of the herd, together with the most practicable way of reaching it. He did not take the shortest way across that arid country and leave the next day's camping-place to chance—as Wooden Shoes had done. He felt that there was too much at stake, and the cattle were too thin for any more dry drives; long drives there were, but such was his generalship that there was always water at the end.

He rode miles and miles that he might have shirked, and he never slept until the next day's move, at least, was clearly defined in his mind and he felt sure that he could do no better by going another route.

These lonely rides gave him over to the clutch of thoughts he had never before harbored in his sunny nature. Grim, ugly thoughts they were, and not nice to remember afterward. They swung per-

sistently around a central subject, as the earth revolves around the sun; and, like the earth, they turned and turned on the axis of his love for a woman.

In particularly ugly moods he thought that if Harry Conroy were caught and convicted of horse-stealing, Jessie must perforce admit his guilt and general unworthiness—Rowdy called it general cussedness—and Rowdy be vindicated in her eyes. Then she would marry him, and go with him to the Red Deer country and—air-castles for miles! When he awoke to the argument again, he would tell himself savagely that if he could, by any means, bring about Conroy's speedy conviction, he would do so."

This was unlike Rowdy, whose generous charity toward his enemies came near being a fault. He might feel any amount of resentment for wrong done, but cold-blooded revenge was not in him; that he had suffered so much at Conroy's hands was due largely to the fact that Conroy was astute enough to read Rowdy aright, and unscrupulous enough to take advantage. Add to that a small-minded jealousy of Rowdy's popularity and horsemanship, one can easily imagine him doing some rather nasty things. Perhaps the meanest, and the

one which rankled most in Rowdy's memory, was the cutting of Rowdy's latigo just before a riding contest, in which the purse and the glory of a championship-belt seemed in danger of going to Rowdy.

Rowdy had got a fall that crippled him for weeks, and Harry had won the purse and belt—and the enmity of several men better than he. For though morally sure of his guilt, no one could prove that he had cut the strap, and so he got off unpunished, except that Pink thrashed him—a bit unscientifically, it is true, since he resorted to throwing rocks toward the last, but with a thoroughness worthy even of Pink.

But in moods less ugly he shrank from the hurt that must be Jessie's if she should discover the truth. Jessie's brother a convicted thief serving his sentence in Deer Lodge! The thought was horrible; it was brutal cruelty. If he could only know where to look for that lad, he'd help him out of the country. It was no good shutting him up in jail; that wouldn't help him any, or make him better. He hoped he would get off—go somewhere, where they couldn't find him, and stay there.

He wondered where he was, and if he had money enough to see him through. He might be no

good—he sure wasn't!—but he was Jessie's brother, and Jessie believed in him and thought a lot of him. It would be hard lines for that little girl if Harry were caught. Bill Brown, the meddlesome old freak!—he didn't blame Jessie for not wanting to stop there that night. She did just the right thing.

With all this going round and round, monotonously persistent in his brain, and with the care of four thousand lean kine and more than a hundred saddle-horses—to say nothing of a dozen overworked, fretful cow-punchers—Rowdy acquired the "corrugated brow" fast enough without any cultivation.

The men were as the Silent One had predicted. They made drives that lasted far into the night, stood guard, and got along with so little sleep that it was scarce worth mention, and did many things that shaved close the impossible—just because Rowdy looked at them straightly, with half-closed lids, and asked them if they thought they could.

Pink began to speak of their new foreman as "Moses"; and when the curious asked him why, told them soberly that Rowdy could "hit a rock with his quirt and start a creek running bank full." When

Rowdy heard that, he thought of the miles of weary searching, and wished that it were true.

They had left the home ranch a day's drive behind them, and were going north. Rowdy had denied himself the luxury of riding over to see Jessie, and he was repenting the sacrifice in deep gloom and sincerity, when two men rode into camp and dismounted, as if they had a right. The taller one—with brawn and brain a-plenty, by the look of him—announced that he was the sheriff, and would like to stop overnight.

Rowdy gave him welcome half-heartedly, and questioned him craftily. A sheriff is not a detective, and does not mind giving harmless information; so Rowdy learned that they had traced Conroy thus far, and believed that he was ahead of them and making for Canada. He had dodged them cleverly two or three times, but now they had reason to believe that he was not more than half a day's ride before them. They wanted to know if the outfit had seen any one that day, or sign of any one having passed that way.

Rowdy shook his head.

"I bet it was Harry Conroy driving that little

bunch uh horses up the creek, just as we come over the ridge," spoke Pink eagerly.

Rowdy could have choked him. "He wouldn't be driving a lot of horses," he interposed quickly.

"Well, he might," argued Pink. "If I was making a quick get-away, and my horse was about played out—like his was apt t' be—I'd sure round up the first bunch I seen, and catch me a fresh one—if I was a horse-thief. I'll bet yuh——"

The sheriff had put down his cup of coffee. "Is there any place where a man could corral a bunch on the quiet?" he asked crisply. It was evident that Pink's theory had impressed him.

"Yes, there is. There's an old corral up at the ford—Drowning Ford, they call it—that I'd use, if it was me. It was an old line camp, and there's a cabin. It's down on the flat by the creek, and it's as God-forsaken a place as a man'd want t' hide in, or t' change mounts." Pink hitched up his chap-belt and looked across at Rowdy. He was aching for a sight of Harry Conroy in handcuffs, and he was certain that Rowdy felt the same. "If it was me," he added speculatively, "and I thought I was far enough in the lead, I'd stop there till morning."

"How far is it from here?" demanded the sheriff standing up.

Pink told him he guessed it was five miles. Whereupon the sheriff announced his intention of going up there at once, and Pink hinted rather strongly that he would like to go with them. The sheriff did not know Pink; he looked down at his slimness and at the yellow fringe of curls showing under his hat brim, at his pink cheeks and dimples and girlish hands, and threw back his head in a loud ha! ha!

Pink asked him politely, but rather stiffly, what there was funny about it. The sheriff laughed louder and longer; then, being the sort of man who likes a joke now and then, even in the way of business, he solemnly deputized Pink, and patted him on the shoulder and told him gravely that they couldn't possibly do without him.

It looked for a minute as if Pink were going at him with his fists—but he didn't. He reflected that one must not offer violence to an officer of the law, and that, being made a deputy, he would have to go, anyway; so he gritted his teeth and buckled on his gun, and went along sulkily.

They rode silently, for the most part, and swiftly.

Even in the dusk they could see where a band of horses had been driven at a gallop along the creek bank. When they neared the place it was dark. Pink pulled up and spoke for the first time since leaving the tent.

"We better tie up our horses here and walk," he said, quite unconscious of the fact that he was usurping the leadership, and thinking only of their quest.

But the sheriff was old at the business, and not too jealous of his position. He signed to his deputy proper, and they dismounted.

When they started on, Pink was ahead. The sheriff observed that Pink's gun still swung in its scabbard at his hip, and he grinned—but that was because he didn't know Pink. That the gun swung at his hip would have been quite enough for any one who did know him; it didn't take Pink all day to get into action.

Ten rods from the corral, which they could distinguish as a black blotch in the sparse willow growth, Pink turned and stopped them. "I know the layout here," he whispered. "I'll just sneak ahead and rubber around. You Rubes sound like the beginning of a stampede, in this brush."

The sheriff had never before been called a Rube —to his face, at least. The audacity took his breath; and when he opened his mouth for scathing speech, Pink was not there. He had slipped away like a slim, elusive shadow, and the sheriff did not even know the exact direction of his going. There was nothing for it but to wait.

In five minutes Pink appeared with a silent suddenness that startled them more than they would like to own.

"He's somewheres around," he announced, in a murmur that would not carry ten feet. "He's got a horse in the corral, and, from the sound, he's got him all saddled; and the gate's tied shut with a rope."

"How d'yuh know?" grunted the sheriff crossly.

"Felt of it, yuh chump. He's turned the bunch loose and kept up a fresh one, like I said he would. It's blame dark, but I could see the horse—a big white devil. It's him yuh hear makin' all that racket. If he gits away now——"

"Well, we didn't come for a chin-whackin' bee," snapped the sheriff. "I come out here t' git him."

Pink gritted his teeth again, and wished the sheriff was just a man, so he could lick him. He

led them forward without a word, thinking that Rowdy wanted Harry Conroy captured.

The sheriff circled warily the corral, peered through the rails at the great white horse that ran here and there, whinnying occasionally for the band, and heard the creak of leather and the rattle of the bit. Pink was right; the horse was saddled, ready for immediate flight.

"Maybe he's in the cabin," he whispered, coming up where Pink stood listening tensely at all the little night sounds. Pink turned and crept silently to the right, keeping in the deepest shade, while the others followed willingly. They were beginning to see the great advantage of having Pink along, even if he had called them Rubes.

The cabin door yawned wide open, and creaked weirdly as the light wind moved it; the interior was black and silent—suspiciously silent, in the opinion of the sheriff. He waited for some time before venturing in, fearing an ambush. Then he caught the flicker of a shielded match, called out to Conroy to surrender, and leveled his gun at the place.

There was no answer but the faint shuffle of stealthy feet on the board floor. The sheriff called another warning, cocked his gun—and came near

shooting Pink, who walked composedly out of the door into the sheriff's astonished face. The sheriff had been sure that Pink was just behind him.

"What the hell——" began the sheriff explosively.

"He ain't here," said Pink simply. "I crawled in the window and hunted the place over."

The sheriff glared at him dumbly; he could not reconcile Pink's daredevil behavior with Pink's innocent, girlish appearance.

"I tell yuh the corral's what we want t' keep cases on," Pink added insistently. "He's sure somewheres around—I'd gamble on it. He saddled that horse t' git away on. That horse is sure the key t' this situation, old-timer. If you fellows'll keep cases on the gate, I'll cover the rear."

He made his way quietly to the back of the corral, inwardly much amused at the tractability of the sheriff, who took his deputy obediently to watch the gate.

Pink squatted comfortably in the shade of a willow and wished he dared indulge in a cigarette, and wondered what scheme Harry was trying to play now.

Fifty feet away the big white horse still circled round and round, rattling his bridle impatiently, and shaking the saddle in an occasional access of rage, and whinnying lonesomely out into the gloom.

So they waited and waited, and peered into the shadows, and listened to the trampling horse fretting for freedom and his mates.

The cook had just called breakfast when Pink dashed up to the tent, flung himself from his horse, and confronted Rowdy—a hollow-eyed, haggard Rowdy who had not slept all night, and whose eyes questioned anxiously.

"Well," Rowdy said, with what passed for composure, "did you get him?"

Pink leaned against his horse, with one hand reaching up and gripping tightly the horn of the saddle. His cheeks held not a trace of color, and his eyes were full of a great horror.

"They're bringin' him t' camp," he answered huskily. "We found a horse—a big white horse they call the Fern Outlaw"—the Silent One started and came closer, listening intently; evidently he knew the horse—"saddled in the corral, and the gate tied shut. We dubbed around a while, but we didn't

find—Harry. So we camped down by the corral and waited. We set there all night—and the horse flaunching around inside something fierce. When—it come daybreak—I seen something—by the fence, inside. It was—Harry." Pink shivered and moistened his dry lips. "That Fern Outlaw—some uh the boys know—is a devil t' mount. He'd got Harry down—hell, Rowdy! it—it was sure—awful. He'd been there all night—and that horse stomping——"

"Shut up!" Rowdy turned all at once deathly sick. He had once seen a man who had been trampled by a maddened, man-killing horse. It had not been a pretty sight. He sat down weakly and covered his face with his shaking hands.

The others stood around horrified, muttering disjointed, shocked sentences.

Pink lifted his head from where it had fallen upon his arm. "One thing, Rowdy—I done. You can tell Jessie. I shot that horse."

Rowdy dropped his hands and stood up. Yes, he must tell Jessie.

"You'll have to take the herd on," he told Pink in his masterful way. "I'll catch you to-morrow some time. I've got to go back and tell Jessie. You

know the trail I was going to take—straight across to Wild Horse Lake. From there you strike across to North Fork—and if I don't overtake you on the way, I'll hit camp some time in the night. It's all plain sailing."

CHAPTER XIII.

Rowdy Finds Happiness.

Miss Conroy was rather listlessly endeavoring to persuade the First Reader class that "catch" should not be pronounced "ketch," when she saw Rowdy ride past the window. Intuition of something amiss sent her to the door before he reached it.

"Can't you give the kids a day off?" he began, without preface. "I've got such a lot to talk about —and I don't come very often." He thought that his tone was perfectly natural; but all the same she turned white. He rode on to a little tree and tied his horse—not that it was necessary to tie him, but to avoid questions.

Miss Conroy went in and dismissed the children, although it was only fifteen minutes after nine. They gathered up their lunch-pails and straggled out reluctantly, round-eyed, and curious. Rowdy waited until the last one had gone before he went in. Miss Conroy sat in her chair on the platform, and

she was still white; otherwise she seemed to have herself well in hand.

"It's about Harry," she asserted, rather sharply. "Have they—caught him?"

Rowdy stopped half-way down the aisle and stared. "How did you know they were—after him?"

"He came to me night before last, and—told me." She bit her lip, took firm hold on her honesty and her courage, and went on steadily. "He came because he—wanted money. I've wanted to see you since, to tell you that—I misjudged you. I know all about your—trouble, and I want you to know that I think you are—that you did quite right. You are to understand that I cannot honestly uphold—Harry. He is—not the kind of brother—I thought."

Rowdy went clanking forward till only the table stood between. "Did he tell you?" he demanded, in a curious, breathless fashion.

"No, he did not. He denied everything. It was Pink. He told me long ago—that evening, just after you—the last time I saw you. I told him he—lied. I tried not to believe it, but I did. Pink knew I would; he said so. The other night I asked

Harry about—those things he did to you. He lied to me. I'd have forgiven him—but he lied. I—can't forgive that. I——"

"Hush!" Rowdy threw out a gloved hand quickly. He could not bear to let her go on like that.

She looked up at him, and all at once she was shaking. "There's something—tell me!"

"They didn't take him," he said slowly, weighing each word and looking down at her pityingly. "They never will. He—had an accident. A horse—fell with him—and—he was dead when they picked him up." It was as merciful a version as he could make it, but the words choked him, even then. "Girlie!" He went around and knelt, with his arms holding her close.

After a long while he spoke again, smoothing her hair absently, and never noticing that he had not taken off his gloves. His gray hat was pushed aslant as his head rested against hers.

"Perhaps, girlie, it's for the best. We couldn't have saved him from—the other; and that would have been worse, don't you think? We'll forget all but the good in him"—he could not help thinking that there would not be much to remember—"and

I'll get a little home ready, and come back and get you before snow flies—and—you'll be kind of happy, won't you?

"Maybe you haven't heard—but Eagle Creek has made me foreman of his outfit that's going to Canada. It's a good position. I can make you comfortable, girlie—and happy. Anyway, I'll try, mighty hard. You'll be ready for me when I come —won't you, girlie?"

Miss Conroy raised her face, all tear-stained, but with the light of happiness fighting the sorrow in her eyes, nodded just enough to make the movement perceptible, and settled her head to a more comfortable nestling-place on his shoulder.

THE END.

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